Scintilla

Posted originally on the Archive of Our Own at http://archiveofourown.org/works/20044009.

Rating:	Explicit
Archive Warning:	No Archive Warnings Apply
Category:	M/M
Fandom:	Hannibal (TV)
Relationships:	Will Graham/Hannibal Lecter, Will Graham & Hannibal Lecter
Characters:	Will Graham, Hannibal Lecter, Jack Crawford
Additional Tags:	season 1 AU, Alternate Universe - Canon Divergence, Paranormal AU, witch!Will, Hannibal is Hannibal, Witchcraft, Magic, Ritual Sex
Language:	English
Collections:	Hannigram_Reverse_Bang_2019, Sub!Hannibal
Stats:	Published: 2019-07-30 Words: 31,592 Chapters: 1/1

Scintilla

by novamare

Summary

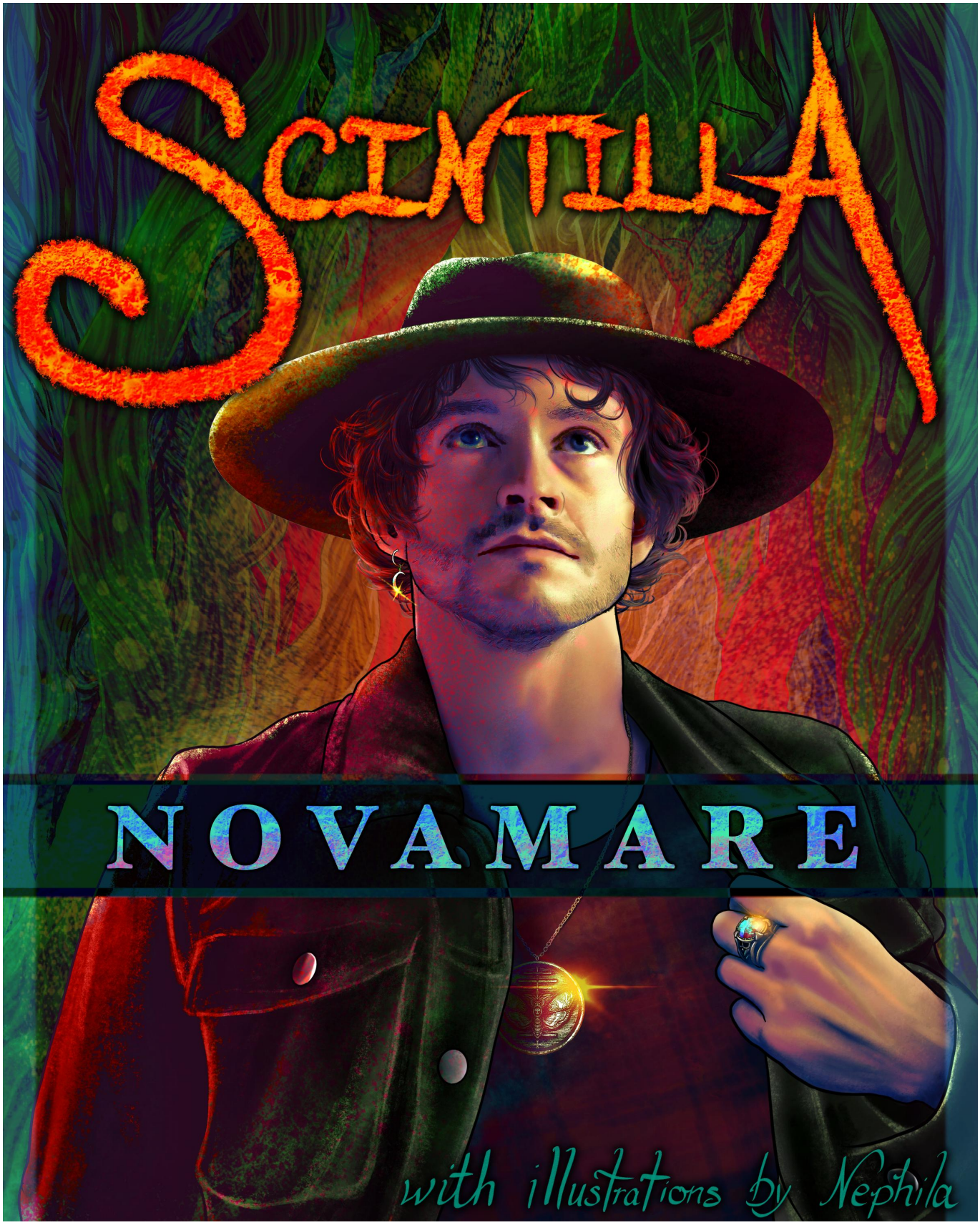
Dr. Hannibal Lecter has been hired to fix Will Graham, an FBI agent who's solved more cases than anyone else but has a strong disdain for his boss and the Bureau as a whole. Will immediately piques Hannibal's interest, and the deeper he digs, the more inexplicable curiosities and careful secrets he finds. And then he finds a hat with an inscription:

This ritual cover belongs to W.G. of the Mayfly Coven, est. 1833.

Notes

This was written for the Hannigram Reverse Bang 2019, inspired by some beautiful art by the wonderful Nephila.

See the end of the work for more notes



Will Graham, 11:30.

Dr. Hannibal Lecter stared at his datebook, tracing down the day's column. It was an unusual morning, since his first two appointments had both cancelled—Franklyn was out of town; Nora had caught the flu—but out of habit, if nothing else, Hannibal had arrived at his office at 8:00 sharp with nothing to do except wait.

He closed his datebook and slid it to the side of his desk to line up with a small stack of books. As he stood and buttoned his jacket, Hannibal opened the drawer to his left. Inside, set neatly atop the manila file folders, was a white business card with embossed lettering.

Taking the card with him, he turned on his heel and strode to the foyer of his office, where he kept an old rotary phone. Only patients knew the number, and the door to the foyer was closed during appointments to avoid unfortunate interruptions. Everyone else had his home number, which had a message machine and a more pleasant ringtone. Even Franklyn had it—although Hannibal decided that was perhaps a mistake, since the man tended to call for any minor woe, and as dedicated as Hannibal was to helping his patients, usually he preferred to eat his dinner in peace.

He picked up the handset and dialed the number on the card. As soon as the line connected, a tired voice said, "Crawford speaking."

"Good morning, Agent Crawford. It's Dr. Lecter. Several of my patients have already cancelled today, and I was hoping you'd ensure me Mr. Graham won't be the next."

Crawford's weary sigh sounded tinny through the old receiver. "If he doesn't show, call me. I'll drag him to you myself. He needs help, and I need him to get it."

That had been the introduction of the task Crawford had given Hannibal a few weeks ago, followed quickly by a promise of "as much as the Bureau can afford to pay." Of course, Hannibal didn't care much for the money; he could support his lifestyle quite nicely in his current situation. What had intrigued him, convinced him to add another appointment to the datebook, was the man he was meant to help. Will Graham. Hannibal had met him once, just long enough to notice how Will refused to look him in the eye for more than a fleeting moment. Just long enough to catch the nameless but curled air with which Will held himself. Just long enough to feel an intense urge—somewhere between curiosity and desire, although Hannibal often considered these two feelings as variations on the same theme—deep in his chest, just beneath his stomach and close to his spine.

"Well," Hannibal said into the phone's transmitter, "I hope I can be of help, and I look forward to speaking with him today. But I feel the need to warn you again, Agent Crawford, that what you've asked me to do cannot be done overnight."

"Of course."

Crawford hadn't sounded as patient a week ago, when he'd shown up uninvited and unexpected at Hannibal's office. A week ago, the tension he carried in his shoulders seemed anxious, desperate. Hannibal had admired how steady Crawford had been able to keep his voice as they danced through small talk and then as he asked for help with a psychological profile.

"Deeply held rage—"

"I wouldn't put it that way, Dr. Lecter," Crawford interrupted, his voice just loud enough to clip in the telephone's receiver. Hannibal pulled the handset away from his face an inch. When the man on the other side of the wire spoke again, he was more collected. "Will is angry with the FBI, yes. But rage? Doesn't that imply a violence he has proven himself incapable of?"

Hannibal had gotten that story in the file Crawford had handed over a week ago. Former homicide detective, allowed to retire gracefully after freezing in the line of duty with a finger on the trigger but unable to pull it. Had he been fired, Will Graham would have never been able to secure a teaching position at Quantico or do anything else with the beautiful mind he'd been given. A memo in the file, written by Will's old Chief of Police, called that possibility a great tragedy.

"If you already have such a clear profile on Mr. Graham, why contract me to do it again?" Hannibal smiled politely, as if Crawford could see him through the telephone. At the very least, perhaps the tight pleasantry could be heard in his voice, as he tried to be perfectly clear in his articulation.

Hannibal brushed his thumb over the embossed text of Crawford's business card. He was almost impressed that the FBI would splash out for such a luxury. His own cards were printed on sturdy off-white cotton stock, with his name and contact information in elegant black letterpress. Over one dinner, he had, quite literally, chewed over whether or not to include one of his sketches as a watermark. Deciding against it on the basis that few patients wanted to see psychiatry for the art that it was, Hannibal had finished off his glass of wine and pressed a folded napkin to his lips.

Another sigh came across the line, low and crackling."It's hard to admit that he hates me as much as he does."

"I said nothing about hatred, Agent Crawford. Only that a deeply held rage, the kind I imagine I will find in Mr. Graham, is a very difficult knot to unravel."

Rarely did Hannibal get a patient with a clearly stated mission stamped across his file. Will Graham was the exception, he supposed. He'd been given a series of objectives for Will, most of which he considered possible although dangerous. The foundational objective was to determine the root of Will's rage. Then, Hannibal was instructed to mitigate that rage until stopped affecting Will's performance in the field.

Crawford had mutilated a metaphor in asking Hannibal to teach Will how to pull the trigger.

"Yes, I understand, Doctor," Crawford finally said, but the sound of shuffling papers was louder. "If going slow helps him bend rather than break, I am glad to go slow."

Hannibal glanced back through the door to his office, where the morning sunlight diffused through the drawn shade. A few motes of dust caught in the light and seemed to hang in the air before drifting off again. "What if he needs to break, Agent Crawford?" Hannibal mused, mostly for his own pleasure. Curiosities like these tended to consume him, and it was only a strict discipline that kept him from testing every hypothesis. He chose his tests carefully.

"Keep him whole until this case is closed. I can't afford to lose him right now."

Although Hannibal made no promises—they were finicky bastards that liked to complicate things—he said, "Very well, Agent Crawford."

A commotion on the other end of the line masked whatever Crawford said next, and Hannibal frowned as he heard what sounded like half a dozen voices all talking over one another. Then the noise was muffled, as if Crawford had pressed his phone against his chest, and Hannibal took the moment of almost privacy to let out a controlled sigh. When Crawford finally raised the phone, he said, "I'm sorry, Dr. Lecter. I've got to go. Something's just turned up. If he doesn't show, call my cell."

Hannibal flipped the business card over and took a pen from beside the base of the phone. He noted down the number as Crawford rattled it off. “I should hope it won’t be necessary,” Hannibal said then, tucking the business card into his breast pocket.

“Once you’re done with him, bring him to my office. I want you there.”

Before Hannibal could say as much as a goodbye, the line clicked and Crawford’s voice was replaced after a breath by the phone’s steady, humming dial tone. Returning the handset to its cradle, Hannibal realized that Crawford’s desperation must have been worse than he initially thought. The next curiosity struck him with a dark sort of pleasure, the kind he enjoyed the most, as he wondered just how badly Will Graham had been behaving.

***

At 11:30, after trying to occupy himself with sketching and reading and planning dinner—all of which was only partially successful; his mind kept wandering off to other things, like how overhead lighting caught on a mess of curly hair—Hannibal let out a low sigh and closed the waiting room door. Wondering if he should call Agent Crawford then or wait another five minutes, he turned and headed for the ladder to the mezzanine of his office.

He was feeling generous as he paced along the bookshelves, looking for some specific title, although he wasn’t sure which one. It would stick out to him, the way Will Graham had stuck out. The man had almost glowed under the fluorescent lights in Crawford’s office. Hannibal couldn’t quite describe it as anything other than an aura, as if the air around Will Graham was too excited, shimmering with no reason. There were a few scientific explanations Hannibal could come up with—the mirage effect and several of its variations—but none of the theories held in practice. A trick of the light, then, just a fluke of nature that happened only by coincidence to fall over Will Graham like a veil.

Hannibal’s jaw clenched. As his fingers found the edge of a book, a single knock sounded at the door to the waiting room.

“Just a moment, please,” he called out as he blindly grabbed the slim volume and hurried down the ladder.

Not bothering to stop at his desk to set the book down, Hannibal went to the waiting room door and opened it to reveal Will Graham, who looked as tired and tense as he had the last time Hannibal had seen him. But now, in his check shirt, tie, sport coat, and glasses, carrying a large leather weekender bag, Will looked older, more professorial.

Hannibal smiled, something polite that didn’t quite give away his intrigue, and said, “Lecture run a little late, Will? I was beginning to think you’d never show up. Please, come in.” He stepped to the side to let Will in.

“Got caught up answering questions about the practice profile,” Will said as he crossed the threshold and dropped his bag next to the pedestal on which a stag statuette stood. “Apparently it’s too difficult to distinguish between resentment and devotion by looking only at a killer’s most frequently played music. Also there was traffic.” Will didn’t look at him, but there was a snark in the man’s voice that Hannibal heard even without seeing the twinkle in his eyes.

Containing his pleasure by sheer force of will alone, Hannibal turned his back to Will and led him into his office, gesturing to the patient chair with the book he still held.

Will caught a glimpse of the spine and met Hannibal's eyes firmly. There was a dark edge to his voice as he said, "A fan of Miller?"

Hannibal turned *The Crucible* over in his hands, flipping through its pages and finding the annotations from the last time he read the script. Its back cover was bent and creased at an unfortunate angle that still hadn't smoothed out from the last several years on a bookshelf. He set the book on his desk, and it fell open to its most comfortable position in Act III. "I played the Reverend Hale many years back," he said, offering Will a slight smile, "and quickly learned I am not made of or for theatrical cloth. The collar was horrifically itchy."

The usual tension in Will's shoulders seemed to double as he sat in one of the two chairs at the center of Hannibal's office. Unbuttoning his jacket, Hannibal took the other. He crossed his legs at the knee and waited for Will to look around the space, perhaps noting the exits and the potential weapons. There were half a dozen bronze statuettes around, all of which would work just fine. Or if bludgeoning was less pleasant to Will, like it was to Hannibal, the thick cords of the curtains would make quite effective makeshift nooses.

"I'm not sure what all Jack's told you," Will finally said after nearly a minute of silence.

Clasping his hands over his knee, Hannibal said, "That you could benefit from speaking with someone outside the FBI. I understand you're not entirely contented in your work."

"I told you not to psychoanalyze me."

Hannibal smiled properly then. "And as I told you, it's not something I can shut off. Nor is it something you can shut off, is it?"

Will stared at his own hands in his lap. "I'm getting better."

Many patients had the same misconception. Halfway through treatment, they would proclaim that they were better and no longer needed help. And if they couldn't be convinced to continue by any of Hannibal's usual methods of persuasion, off they would go. Some ended up dead within the month. Others came crawling back once they realized their mistake. A few of the strong ones made it, though, and the success of the few was enough to convince the many to try.

"Then perhaps Agent Crawford is overcautious."

Hannibal looked Will over, lingering on his delicate mop of curls, then on how his Adam's apple bobbed against the knot of his tie, on how he held his hands in his lap, rubbing his right thumb over the left hand's knuckles, and further down on how the material of his trousers pulled across his thighs. A delicious thrum of desire warmed Hannibal's stomach, and he noticed the shimmer surrounding Will again. In the natural light, it was tinged with a distinct warmth, although it was so nearly imperceptible that part of the pleasure of seeing it was finding it.

Will snorted, and it was such an unbearably adorable sound that Hannibal had to grit his teeth together to avoid some improper look or comment. It would be no good if Will ran back to Crawford, begging to see someone else—anyone else—just because Hannibal couldn't control himself in their very first session.

"I guess he hasn't told you much at all, then. Probably for the better." Will met his eyes then, and Hannibal took a deep, measured breath. "No one ought to see what's inside my head."

“Someone has to, Will.”

A dark flush peeked above the collar of Will’s shirt, and he looked away as he reached up to rub at the back of his neck. The light caught on a ring around Will’s left middle finger, which had been hidden behind his right hand just a moment before. A frown flickered across Hannibal’s face as he noticed a similar soft glow around the ring’s center stone. Still staring at the large window, Will said, “I don’t think that’s how it works, Dr. Lecter.”

“Call me Hannibal, please.”

Will looked at him again, or perhaps through him, as if there were something very dangerous just behind his head. If Hannibal were one predisposed to paranoia, he would have checked over his shoulder. Instead, he smiled at Will, who said, “It’s like saying we should indulge a murderer’s fantasies, hoping they’ll be satisfied with fantasies. Very few of them are.”

“Lots of people fancy themselves murderers, but if the moment came, most can’t pull the trigger.”

Will flinched, and Hannibal sat back in his chair, taking a moment to smooth the wool of his coat. It was October, and the weather was turning for the season. The beauty of autumn had always astounded him, for the leaves and the chill and the golden sun and blood moons, and now for the introduction of a man like Will Graham.

“That’s in my file, I guess? It was one time. I’m better now.”

The repeated assurance—which Hannibal imagined was less for him than for Will himself—instead suggested that Will *wasn’t* better now, no matter how much he wished he was. Selfishly, Hannibal was glad Will still needed help, and he was happy to be the one to offer it.

Hannibal stood and crossed to his desk, where he opened the topmost drawer and pulled out a thin manila folder with Will’s name written across the tab in Hannibal’s crisp script. He opened the folder and flipped through the pages until he found the one he wanted. Holding out the paper, Hannibal gestured for Will to come closer as he said, “But, for those who aren’t murderers, discussing the fantasies helps to rationalize them, overcome them, and it’s proven the discussion doesn’t encourage action.”

Glancing helplessly around the office, Will was quiet for a long moment in which Hannibal enjoyed his patient’s quickening breaths. Finally he stood and took three steps in Hannibal’s direction, putting himself just close enough that he could reach out and, with his arm’s full length, take the document by its edge.

He read over the bullet points of his professional career in just a few moments. Frowning, Will glanced up and said, “No mention of Jack putting me back in the field.”

“Is it typical for Agent Crawford to give outdated information?” Hannibal leaned back against his desk, setting the rest of the file aside. He knew it by heart, anyway.

That was not to say that he knew everything about Will Graham, although he certainly wanted to. Unfortunately, Hannibal recognized there was so much about Will that couldn’t be contained in a file or even on paper, as was true of every patient, every person. Fortunately, Hannibal rather enjoyed the investigation, the digging through the layers of habit and walls—Will had called them forts, and Hannibal rather liked the militaristic charm of it, mostly because it welcomed siege—until he held the malleable truth in his hands.

“Only when it’s to protect himself.” Will held the paper back out to him, saying, “By most accounts, I’m too unwell to do what he wants me to do.”

Hannibal stepped closer to his patient, much closer than necessary to take the document back but not nearly as close as he wanted. Will was smaller than he seemed to remember, and when Hannibal spoke, his voice was dark as he tried to mask his own blooming arousal.

“Unwell?”

Looking up at him, Will swallowed heavily, and Hannibal stared down at his throat as he said, “Insane.”

If it had been any other patient, perhaps Hannibal would have gone in depth about the history and etymology of the words relating to his profession. Insane, crazy, hysterical, nervous, mad. Perhaps he would have made some specific point, as articulate as always, about accepting or reclaiming such terminology. There was a series of conversations to be had there, but he wasn’t interested in having any of them at the moment.

“And are you?”

Will held his gaze, and Hannibal could finally and fully appreciate the glimmer of dark eyes—blue but not as buoyant—for the first time. “No,” Will said with a tiny shake of his head, just enough to shift the curls over his brow. The silence returned for a beat, heavier now, before Will sighed and said, “I don’t think so. Just…different. Enough to be useful.”

“Different how?”

It was then that Hannibal noticed a small dimple in Will’s right earlobe, an empty piercing. He edged a breath closer to Will, who suddenly snapped into movement, stepping around him with a wide berth and stopping at the edge of his desk. Hannibal turned on his heel, following the man’s rich, wafting scent, just as Will picked up *The Crucible* and turned the pages aimlessly, avoiding Hannibal’s stare.

“If you’re like the rest of them and want to call me crazy, can you hurry up? I’ve got work to do.” The man stared at the page, tense as if the characters would leap off of it to attack him. In the last few pages of the book, Will paused and seemed to study the notes Hannibal had written beside his lines. Nothing but a mere murmur, Will read from the script: “I come to do the Devil’s work.”

Hannibal returned to his seat, crossed his legs again, and, instead of finishing the line Will had begun, said, “I’m in the habit of taking my time when making such decisions, Will.”

Closing the book and running a thumb across the back cover, over a small image of the playwright and then over a short summary that did the work no justice, Will said, “Okay, then can we talk about something other than my possible insanity?”

“Certainly.” Hannibal watched Will carefully, looking for a shift in the tension in his shoulders to move down his arms and into his hands, or for his jaw to clench and teeth to grind. “Why are you angry with Agent Crawford?”

“That’s not exactly—” Hannibal was impressed that the physical cues Will gave were much smaller—nearly invisible—than he expected. He saw nothing more than a twitch in Will’s face, his lips pulling back into a tiny sneer. Will sighed and relented. “I’m not.”

“You are. I can see it.”

Seeming to school his face—which came with a flicker in the shimmer around him that Hannibal noted as a curiosity not to let go unexplained—Will set the book back on Hannibal’s desk and leaned against it the way Hannibal had earlier. He crossed his arms over his chest, and the material of his sport coat pulled over his biceps and puckered at his shoulders. As blank as Hannibal had seen him so far, Will said, “Jack thinks I’m his toy.”

Hannibal cocked his head to the side, wanting to reach out and straighten Will’s tie, which had shifted just to the right. His fingers twitched in his lap, and he occupied them instead by taking a fountain pen from the side table near his chair and pressing his thumb into the dull edge of its clip until he began to feel a soft ache. Once his willpower had won out, he said, “But you don’t think you are?”

Will laughed, although Hannibal hesitated to consider it a laugh. More accurately, it was a sharp, derisive snort masked by vaguely upturned lips. “No, I am. Functionally.”

“And how does that make you feel?”

Will glared at him, and Hannibal clenched his jaw again, squeezing the pen tighter, and wishing he had a knife or rope or something else with which he could sate himself. Will seemed not to notice as he pushed himself away from Hannibal’s desk and began to pace just in front of it. “I’d rather not be a tool in his toolbox, if that’s what you’re asking,” Will said as he turned at the edge of the Aubusson rug under the desk. Halfway through the next lap, he paused and rested his hands on his hips. “I just want to do my job without him meddling.”

Reaching out to take his notepad from the table, Hannibal tried to distract himself from staring at Will by drawing him instead. As he sketched out the gestural shape of Will’s body, Hannibal said, “What’s your job?”

“Oh, that’s not in the file?” Snark made Will’s voice softer in a way that Hannibal might have called playful, except Will began to pace again, frowning down at the carpet under his feet.

Hannibal paused in his sketching—leaving a tendril of ink across the figure’s face, the way Will’s hair brushed across his forehead—to make a note in the margins about the speed with which Will seemed to shut down his own pleasures in favor of a stricter focus. On what, Hannibal couldn’t quite tell, and that question was added to the list to work through later. For now, he said, “It is. But I’d like to hear you describe your own work.”

Once again Will paused halfway through a lap, staring out the window. Hannibal knew there wasn’t much to see through the thin privacy curtain and the glass and the foliage, so instead he focused on the shimmer around Will, which he abruptly decided to call the man’s scintilla: so tiny but definite, a spark that followed him without explanation.

Will reached up to straighten his tie and said, “I get in the heads of killers.” When Hannibal didn’t respond immediately—in part because he had gone back to his sketching, adding shadows to the drawing’s face and rounding the slump of its shoulders—Will began to fill the silence. “I… experience them. What they do. And I use that to help track them down and solve cases and hopefully get justice for their victims.” With a small shrug, Will finally looked at Hannibal again and said, “That’s the short of it.”

Crawford had said as much, although in more words, making sure to emphasize that Will's intense empathy was the result of a lifelong talent and not any torturous training the FBI had inflicted. Hannibal didn't care where it came from, except that it came from Will, and, he supposed, it could help rule out one potential source of Will's rage.

Happy to take what he was given and demand more, Hannibal held Will's gaze, the nib of his pen hovering just over his sketch's roughed-in chest. "And the long of it?"

"It's too complicated to explain in half an hour, Dr. Lecter." Will's eyes darkened as he glanced over at the empty chair across from Hannibal. Someday, Hannibal decided then, Will would look forward to sitting in that chair. Not long after that, Will would want nothing more than to leave the chair only to close the distance between them. Eventually, the office would be a formality, and Hannibal's real work would happen across a dinner table or on a loveseat or in bed.

As he considered how small Will might feel beside him, Hannibal studied how Will's scintilla seemed to pulse—a mere oscillation in intensity that was most prominent around his hands and throat. When Will met his eyes, Hannibal smiled softly and said, "Hannibal."

"Hannibal." As Will corrected himself, without hesitation or argument, his scintilla pulsed faster, and the warmth blooming in Hannibal's chest flowered into a burning bouquet of different desires, all tangled together between his ribs.

He closed his notepad and set it aside with his pen. The sketch wasn't finished, but Hannibal imagined it wouldn't be his last chance to capture his patient's beauty on paper. If he had the world his way—something Hannibal was rather talented at ensuring—there would be no shortage of opportunities to draw Will. Standing and buttoning his jacket, Hannibal said, "No worries, Will. We've got plenty of time."

"What do you mean?" Will frowned, and Hannibal wished he could reach out and use his thumb to smooth away the furrows of Will's brow as if he were made of soft clay.

Instead, he smiled, picked up his notepad, and went to his desk, passing Will with barely two inches between them. As he collected his datebook, Will's file, and his copy of *The Crucible*, he said, "Agent Crawford has asked me to escort you back to his office." He turned to see Will staring intently at him, still frowning, and now with a distinct anger in his eyes. His scintilla looked sharper, too, and Hannibal wondered if or how Will controlled it—consciously or otherwise.

"What?"

Of course, determining how the scintilla worked was predicated on determining what exactly it was. In all his years with all his many, many patients, Hannibal had never seen anything like it. A small, vestigial frustration formed a tense knot at the base of his neck as he heard his uncle's deep voice suggesting his scientific brain was stunted from spending too much time drawing.

Hannibal pushed the thought aside and cleared his throat before saying, "He seemed to have some new information about your case."

"Jack's giving me a babysitter? What am I? A threat?" Exasperation sounded particularly charming on Will, and Hannibal would have laughed if he weren't distracted by Will's dark glare.

Hannibal thought he knew the answer—or else Crawford wouldn't have gone through the time, effort, and expense of hiring him—but he turned the question back on Will instead of answering.

“Are you?”

Will scoffed, crossing his arms again and wandering off to study the contents of a black cherry display cabinet against the wall. “This is ridiculous,” he muttered, staring at Hannibal’s collection of first edition Freud books. “You retaliate *one time*, and suddenly you need a handler.”

“Retaliate?” It was a surprise to him, but Hannibal managed to school his expression, just in case Will was watching him in the reflection of the cabinet’s glass. Crawford hadn’t said anything about retaliation, and there was nothing to that effect in Will’s file. Very few patients raised as many questions in the first session, but Hannibal was more intrigued than frustrated. Will Graham was a delightful puzzle, difficult and hiding something, but not impossible for a psychiatrist who made his career in solving puzzles of the mind. And especially for a man like Hannibal, who took his pleasure in the unraveling of minds and bodies both.

Will sighed, reaching up to scrub at his scruffy jaw, and said, “It’s what, an hour to D.C.?”

Hannibal noted the deflection but didn’t push—yet. The pushing would come later, when there was nowhere for Will to run off to. “An hour there and another back, give or take for traffic,” he said. When Will turned on his heel to face him again, apparently grateful for the diversion, Hannibal said, “Shall we get going? If we hurry, we can be back in time for dinner. I’ve been wanting to try a new recipe, and it’s a joy to have friends at one’s table.”

Eying him suspiciously, Will crossed his arms again but said nothing. It wasn’t a rejection, and for now, that was as good as an acceptance in Hannibal’s eyes. With a half-smile, Hannibal gestured to the door and then to the large bag sitting between it and Will.

“I hope that’s not full of bodies,” he teased, beginning to pack his briefcase. He flipped through his copy of *The Crucible*, wondering whether whatever fate had caused him to pull it from the shelf was also telling him to take it for the journey.

The decision was made for him as soon as he noticed the back cover, which was now pristine and flat, missing the deep-set crease that had marred it for years since his days masquerading as the Reverend John Hale. Unable to hide his surprise, Hannibal frowned and glanced up at Will, who gave him an irreverent grin and said, “Very funny, Hannibal.”

A thrill of pleasure at the first unprompted use of his name shot through Hannibal, only to twine with a feeling that approximated curiosity—somewhere between awe and bewilderment—until the two were inseparable from one another. Sliding the book into his briefcase, Hannibal swallowed back the desire to slice Will open, peel back his skin and muscles and organs until he found whatever it was inside the man that answered all of Hannibal’s questions.

When Hannibal’s willpower finally won out and he latched his briefcase, Will looked at him like a deer in the headlights, all the irreverence gone. His grin had faded into a tense grimace, and his scintilla wavered gently, withdrawing into shadow until Hannibal had to strain to see it despite his increasing proficiency in spotting it.

Clearing his throat and apparently feeling the need to clarify himself, Will said, “It’s stuff for work. Jack likes when I’m prepared.”

As the remnants of his fantasy swirled in his gut, Hannibal rolled his shoulders, letting the remaining tension dissolve into his usual well-constructed facade. “I’m happy to drive,” he said with a casual smile, holding his briefcase at his side.

“I can drive myself.”

Hannibal closed the distance between them, rather enjoying how Will stepped back until he bumped into the cabinet, rattling a neat pile of china inside. “No reason to produce twice the pollution if we’re going to the same place,” he said, opening the door beside Will and holding it for him. “We wouldn’t want to get separated and waste Agent Crawford’s time.”

After a brief moment in which Will seemed to debate his options—although there weren’t many available to him, he must have realized—Will sighed, bent to pick up his bag, and left Hannibal’s office the way he’d come in. Smug, Hannibal stopped briefly in the foyer of his office and picked up the phone to cancel the rest of his appointments for the day. He had more important work now.

***

After Hannibal had made his four calls, he left his office and found Will outside, leaning against the front of a Volvo SUV and looking entirely too delicious. His ankles were crossed casually, and the fabric of his sport coat rippled around his shoulders, where he had his arms back to support himself against the car’s hood. It was the first time, Hannibal realized, that he’d seen Will’s scintilla in direct sunlight, and its gossamer shimmer looked like dragonfly wings without the careful tangle of veins. Where the harlequin chimera melted into the rest of reality, Hannibal noticed a soft, scalloping border that rippled faster around Will’s hands and head and hips.

“Which one’s yours?” Will asked, glancing down a long line of luxury cars parked along the street’s curb.

Hannibal offered a slight smile rather than the openmouthed gape that seemed to be his first instinct. In that moment, he couldn’t understand how the strangers walking down the sidewalk weren’t awed by Will’s beauty. They must have been blind, must have had invisible blinkers on, must have been so self-absorbed that nothing—not even Will Graham—could catch their attention. After the incredulity faded, Hannibal reminded himself that most people were like that. Most people never bothered with wasn’t immediately in front of them. And in turn, they missed all the promise of the world they lived in.

As he pulled his keys out of his pocket and unlocked the doors of his car, Hannibal said, “That one.” The headlamps of a sleek black car two down from Will’s Volvo sparked to life, and the car gave a mechanical chirp. Will pushed himself off the hood of his car and picked his bag up off the grass, lazily heading toward Hannibal’s car.

“You know, the bad guys always drive Jags.” Will opened the trunk of Hannibal’s car and tossed his bag in.

With a casualness that belied the sudden relief that he’d been particularly thorough when cleaning up after his last hunt, Hannibal said, “They’re extraordinary cars.”

Will slammed the trunk closed with enough force to make Hannibal grit his teeth. If it had been anyone other than Will, he likely would have doled out a strict dressing down, reminding the offender not to abuse property belonging to others. But as it was, Hannibal decided such a reprimand would only drive away Will, who shrugged and said, “Kind of thuggish.”

“But smart. Elegant.” Hannibal slid into the driver’s seat, turning the ignition and holding back the visceral pleasure that came when the engine turned over and sent a low rumble through the car.

Will sat in the passenger seat beside him, looking uncomfortable against the soft grain of the leather. Finally he relaxed back to buckle his seat belt, but he kept his feet tucked up in the footwell close to the seat, as if the carpet under the glovebox would be destroyed by the soles of his shoes. The unnecessary courtesy was impossibly endearing, and Hannibal immediately forgave Will for the trunk.

“Expensive, more like,” Will said, holding his hands in his lap as if he were afraid to accidentally touch anything.

Hannibal smiled, mostly to himself, as he pulled the car out of the parking space and into the street. Navigating toward the Baltimore-Washington Parkway, he said, “I’ve been lucky in my career.”

It was the explanation he used in most cases, although it ignored all the work he’d dedicated himself to over his adult life. No one that knew him could possibly call him lazy, and those who dared didn’t know him for long. He was rather proud of his dedication and, as a result, equally proud of the things his dedication allowed him, like luxury cars, exquisite art pieces in his office, an unmatchable kitchen in his home, and the freedom to take his mortal pleasures however he liked without turning heads. But rarely did he confess to his own pride. Patients of his who tended to be braggarts were also those he tended to inspect more critically. He figured the same would happen to him, if he weren’t careful.

Glancing out the corner of his eye, Hannibal watched as Will fiddled with his hands, twisting his ring absently. His scintilla caught a halo of sunlight from the windshield, a curious coincidence that send Hannibal’s mind immediately in the direction of angels and goddesses. Finally Will noticed him, and his expression turned sour. “Making lots of money off of crazy people, yeah?”

“Recently, I suppose,” Hannibal said, returning his focus to the ramp onto the parkway. As he came to speed with a sleek ease that still shot a thread of pleasure up from his foot on the accelerator, Hannibal glanced over his shoulder to merge. “But surgery is where the money’s at.”

Although he came from a long line of European wealth, Hannibal had made his own personal fortune in operating rooms around the world. He specialized in thoracic surgery, and sometimes when an unwelcome anger swelled in him, he would put himself back in the operating room, with his hands slick with blood and innards pressing up against him like a lover’s limbs. The visceral memories, even without the scents of sterilization or warm anatomy, could help calm him when very little else could. His hands never shook, his breaths were measured, and his precise, nearly mathematical focus kept him from slipping too far into the fantasies that would otherwise swallow him whole.

He swallowed then, overtaking a dual rear wheel pickup, just as Will sneered and said, “More room for error with a scalpel.”

“That’s where you’re wrong, Will. There’s much more risk in psychiatry.” His voice lacked a bite, as if he were correcting a child who insisted for the second but not the tenth time that Julius Caesar was, in fact, Greek. “The mind is a vastly complicated thing, much more so than the finite number of bones and muscles and nerves in the body.”

Will turned to stare out the window, leaning his elbow against the ridge of the door panel. His hair, which had been a flat brown inside now caught the light and bent reddish at the inner edges of the curls and glossy at the high points.

“I know.”

They were some twenty miles down the road before Hannibal stopped imagining all the ways Will's hair could tangle. Inside the car was quiet except for the steady, low growl of a repressed engine that would likely have preferred more strain. Except, of course, that Hannibal could hear Will's breathing, his careful shifting from one hip to the other, his occasional lip gnawing.

He took some joy in his patient's discomfort, although mostly Hannibal wanted to soothe Will, if only to endear himself to Will however he could. So he set the cruise control and sat back, looking at Will to ask, "Does Agent Crawford pay you well?"

Will's eyes flicked over to meet his for an ephemeral moment, and Hannibal committed the look to memory, wishing he could take the moment of inspiration to sketch him, as Will snapped at him. "Stop calling him that. He's Jack." Moving in his seat to cross his arms over his chest, Will said, "Agent Crawford makes him sound more powerful than he is."

"I was under the impression Jack *was* rather powerful," Hannibal said, raising a brow as he passed a line of slow traffic headed by an old sedan.

Of course Jack Crawford was powerful. One didn't get to be the head of the Behavioral Science Unit without being powerful in one way or another. But where some could have gone the route of direct manipulation, it seemed to Hannibal that Jack had gone the more honorable route of hard work and dedication. But then it didn't quite line up why Jack would employ him with Will Graham, or why Will resented Jack. Hannibal wished he had his notepad, so he could keep his thoughts in ink. But his memory would have to do for now.

Will watched a sedan pass in the side mirror, steadfastly ignoring Hannibal, but said, "He pays me enough to live where I want to live and do what I want to do."

Deflections seemed a key part of Will's conversational style, and Hannibal wasn't impressed. He frowned as he stared out the windshield, and when he wasn't looking, Will reached out and turned on the car's radio. The radio was set to Hannibal's usual station, and Dvořák's *Polednice* underscored the passing of the North Tract on their left. It put them halfway to D.C., and Hannibal hadn't gotten even half of what he'd wanted to know. He'd been too comfortable just to sit beside Will, although now every underutilized minute felt like torture.

Unsatisfied to let the deflection triumph, Hannibal said, "Where do you live?"

When he glanced over to Will, he saw his passenger massaging the back of his hand with the opposite thumb. The stone of his ring caught in the noontime sun, shifting in color unlike any stone Hannibal knew, except perhaps an opal, but the stone had the luster of a diamond.

"Virginia," Will said, glancing over to Hannibal. At first he looked quite pleasant, but then a dark scowl pulled at his lips. "I'm sure my address is somewhere in those papers. You know, just in case Jack needs you to come rescue me from something absurd."

Hannibal considered that for a moment. With some irritation, he realized that no, Jack hadn't given him Will's home address. It wouldn't be difficult to find, but the omission suddenly seemed immense and intentional. He began to wonder what else had been conveniently left out, and he considered asking Will why he thought Jack would expect Hannibal to save him. But instead, all he said was, "Would you like me to rescue you, should something happen?"

The radio's volume spiked, just as the grotesque scherzo began, and Hannibal glanced at Will, who only stared resolutely out the passenger window. His hands pressed against his thighs, fingers

splayed as if he was trying to keep them from shaking. His scintilla, focused around the complex and masculine shapes of Will's fingers, was brighter, louder like the radio, shivering with the crescendos of the movement. Hannibal reached out and turned the radio off with a sharp click, and the weight in the air that he hadn't actively noticed before now suddenly dissipated.

They sat in silence for another few minutes, and Hannibal's mind was working faster than it had in a very long time. Nothing quite added up, as if his logic was stunted at each turn by a random mutation that led him in impossible directions. He hadn't seen Will turn up the volume. All he'd seen was a change in part of Will that was itself impossible, like a tangible shadow. He wanted to touch the scintilla, see if it was warm or cool or electrically charged. Wanted to touch Will, to see if he could separate his patient from this strange aura, to wrestle against his own muddled logic. The inexplicable was infuriating, and Hannibal's jaw clenched as his toe pressed on the accelerator. The Jaguar jumped to attention, gleeful as it sped past the traffic.

Irritated with himself and his stewing confusion, Hannibal cleared his throat and said, "Walk me through the case so far, Will."

"Three bodies," Will said as he reached into his sport coat, pulling a small notebook from an interior pocket. He flipped through the pages, each covered in a mess of scribbles that Hannibal could only see out of the corner of his eye. When he found the one he was looking for, Will said, "One in Pennsylvania, one in New Jersey, one in Delaware. But each within fifty miles of each other."

Hannibal raised a brow. "FBI bait?"

"After ruling out carelessness, that's the obvious answer." Will found a pencil in his jacket, and the scratching of graphite on paper raised the hairs at the back of Hannibal's neck. It was as if he were the one holding the pencil, feeling the drag of fibers up his fingers and arm. Again he wished he had his notepad and the unfinished sketch of Will in it.

"Can you rule out carelessness?"

Will pulled a small stack of folded photos out of the back cover of his notebook, unfolding them and holding them vaguely in Hannibal's direction, although not nearly close or steady enough for Hannibal to see their details. All he saw were the standard elements of crime scene photos, including alarming splashes of bright yellow across an otherwise muted color palette.

"The killer would be mortified to be called careless," Will said, flipping through the photos and studying each one for a moment before moving on to the next, as if he could see something in them he'd never seen before. "He's staged each scene immaculately."

The Jaguar broke into a stretch of empty road between two clusters of traffic, and Hannibal took the opportunity to look more carefully at the photos in Will's lap. One was a wide angle shot of what looked like an unremarkable apartment, large enough not to be in a city, but plain enough not to be luxury. Blood covered the linoleum floors, but there was no body visible.

"He?" Hannibal asked as he returned his focus to the road. In the photo, large, bloody footprints tracked a path from the camera's position around a corner, but nothing proved they belonged to the killer. Out of the corner of his eye, he could see Will's lips quirk up into something nearly a smirk.

"It's mostly instinct, but the statistics are on my side."

Hannibal couldn't argue that, although he was painfully curious about what empathetic instinct Will had. What spoke to him through crime scene photos. What reached out and made him so good at his work. Jack had bragged at length about Will's skill, proud to have a solve rate higher than any other unit. There had to be something special about Will's instinct. Everyone had access to statistics, but not everyone could make the jumps in logic that seemed natural to Will Graham.

Hoping for some deeper insight, Hannibal asked, "Commonalities in the victims?"

"Virtually none." Will turned the pages in his notebook so quickly he couldn't possibly have been reading any of his handwriting. But he found what he was looking for anyway, and read a list off the page. "One asian woman, 28, artist. One white man, 78, professor. One black woman, 43, accountant. No apparent ties to each other." He was quiet for a moment, and Hannibal used one of his favorite tricks by letting the silence hang until his patient felt compelled to fill it. After the car caught up to the next wave of traffic, Will complied: "It's so random it must be intentional."

Hannibal replied quickly this time. "Not careless at all."

Will sighed, and for once Hannibal thought the fort's defenses might be crumbling. Or, at the very least, one wall. He glanced at Will, who was too focused on the photos in his hands to notice. "One commonality, I suppose. Each body is missing the left ring finger."

It wasn't a new revelation, or else Will had a fantastic sense of restraint, but it caught Hannibal like a hook anyway, and he frowned as he considered it. "Were they married?" he asked, glancing over at Will's left hand, but the ring there was hidden by the photos splayed across Will's lap. Hannibal's gaze lingered a moment too long, but again Will didn't seem to notice, which was at once a relief and a growing frustration.

"Only the accountant. Professor was a widower, and the artist single."

Will's conclusion sounded more and more convincing by the minute. Serial killers almost always had some favored trait in their victims. It was what had kept Hannibal safe, since his own preference was decidedly internal, difficult to see without surgery or other art forms that took a lifetime of practice to perfect.

Suddenly struck by some irrational worry that Will could read his mind—although he reminded himself that he had imagined his patient splayed naked, but Will was still in the car with him, and it soothed him somewhat—Hannibal cleared his throat and asked, "Jewelry, then?"

"I doubt the motive of theft," Will said, sounding like the professor he was. "It's a signature, a calling card." Again, Hannibal gave Will time to add, and the trick worked again, as it almost always did, and Will said, "Whatever the motive is, it's relating to marriage, I'm sure."

Hannibal smiled, glancing at his passenger, who looked back at him expectantly. His eyes were fantastically blue, warm even when they tried not to be, and Hannibal felt a tender fondness bloom in his chest as he said, "Perhaps the killer was a divorce attorney?"

"Funny." But Will couldn't help his smile. Hannibal took it as a victory, no matter how small, and delighted at the way Will's lips pulled back, the way his stubbled cheeks looked fuller with the expression. He looked younger. Even his scintilla looked slightly different, as if it had a faint reddish cast, like a blush but less tangible. It hit Hannibal like a rush of blood to the head, and he imagined other ways he could make Will's scintilla flush and shimmer.

The curiosity drove him to say, “I had a patient who was a divorce attorney.”

He waited until Will said, “And?”

“She ended up murdering her husband and children before killing herself, too.” Grinning, Hannibal shrugged and stepped on the accelerator to speed past a series of trucks pulling trailers emblazoned with logos and slogans for Salem Trucking Co.

Will laughed properly this time, so full and rich it seemed impossible for him to be so quiet otherwise. He sounded like he ought to always be laughing. “That’s one way to do it.”

Usually Hannibal preferred to mask his own pleasure, but now he held a candid smile, feeling more at ease than he should have. If he wasn’t careful, he’d forget what he was being paid to do, or that he was being paid to work with Will, and violating that would be a grievous misstep. Except Hannibal was rather familiar with ethical missteps, to the point he nearly considered the flirting around them like dancing.

“She was, of course, very deeply troubled.” Everyone was, and Hannibal included himself in that measure without hesitation. After all, who was it that had found his patient and her family? Who was it that had capitalized on misfortune to harvest a perfectly delicious set of organs from a handsome dead man and his children, only to put the bloody knife back in the dead wife’s hand? Everyone was troubled, but that meant virtually nothing in practice. All that mattered was who got to see the trouble.

Will’s grin hadn’t faded, and Hannibal could hear the spark of devilish curiosity in his voice as he said, “But you took her as a patient anyway?”

Hannibal shifted in his seat and gave him a soft look, wondering whether Will was already putting himself in the position of this old patient. “I saw a challenge, and she needed help.”

“But you failed,” Will said simply, without malice. With his stubborn grin, he looked troubled himself. Of course he was, Hannibal had to remind himself as he imagined that matter-of-fact amusement splashed with blood. Everyone was. And yet, it still didn’t explain why Will was endlessly more intriguing than any other patient Hannibal had ever had. Maybe it was the scintilla. “She snapped.”

“There is only so quickly one can ask someone to bend,” Hannibal said, trying to keep his tone even. “Unfortunately, I saw her only twice before her event.”

Will’s smile disappeared, and he let out a huff that might have been a scoff if he had put more force behind it. “Event.” He shook his head and came to stare out the window again, and Hannibal felt an inkling of shame that was more familiar with competitive loss. Will shuffled the photos on his lap as he said, “That’s so clinical.”

“Would you rather I be more sentimental, Will?”

If it had been any other patient, Hannibal would have restrained himself. Or so he told himself, although it was a rare enough occurrence for him to share a car with his patients or be in any situation that put him so close to a patient that he could nearly feel the heat coming off them. As soon as the thought hit him, Hannibal latched onto it, focusing on the sensation of Will beside him.

Suddenly the radio sparked back to life, halfway through a Debussy prelude, and Hannibal frowned, nearly certain this time that he hadn't seen Will move to turn it on. He glanced at Will and found his scintilla pulsing like a heartbeat, asymmetric and in time with the piano. He couldn't bring himself to turn the radio off, lest it throw off the rhythm or the allure. As Will yanked one photo out of the pile, Hannibal noticed the ring on his left hand glowing like a gemstone under spotlight, despite the fact it was in the dashboard's shadow. Curiosity would kill him, and he was just about to ask about the ring and the scintilla and the rest of it when Will spoke first, his voice flat and low, just as clinical as he had just accused Hannibal of being.

"Artist was found on her side, posed as if she were proposing."

Hannibal glanced at the photo Will held across the center console. The camera's flash lit the body of a naked woman kneeling with her arms outstretched. Her neck was slit from ear to ear, and blood pooled around her, seeping into the plush pile of a white area rug. Hydrogen peroxide could work miracles, but some things were simply impossible.

"And the others?"

Will sighed, holding up one photo after another, each gruesome but impersonal in that way only crime scene photographers could manage. "Professor's head obliterated by shotgun while wearing a wedding gown with a veil over the stump of his neck. Accountant gutted and stuffed with half a dozen white doves." Will shifted in his seat, and Hannibal briefly considered offering a pit stop but hesitated to give Will a chance to escape before they were safely on the FBI's turf. Will collected all the photos and put them away as he said, "The birds were still alive, by the way, but with their wings clipped. Beverly got a vet to confirm they drowned in her blood."

"Lovely," Hannibal said as they crossed the state line and immediately got caught in traffic. "A jilted lover, then? A man stood up at the altar?" It wouldn't be a particularly unusual motive, he supposed. He heard enough marital complaints from his own patients to believe it, although only the one had ever acted in such a violent way. The rest kept to passive aggressive comments and killing, at most, their own sex lives.

Will slid his notebook back into his coat and crossed his arms over his chest, squeezing his legs together. "Don't you have other patients you're standing up?"

"One benefit of appointments is that they can be cancelled," Hannibal said, reconsidering his unmade offer to stop at a gas station. If he wanted, they could stop and never get back on the road, leave Jack waiting and wondering and without anyone else to call. But it was no more than twenty minutes to Jack's door, and it wouldn't do to immediately break his trust. And anyway, Hannibal rather enjoyed watching Will squirm.

Glaring out at the traffic in front of them and nearly pouting, Will said, "Jack wouldn't let me cancel mine."

"Did you want to?" Hannibal tossed a casual look at his passenger, but he was watching Will intently for any cues that made it through the walls Will built around himself. He hoped he had begun to crumble the bricks, or at least wash away the mortar, and he hoped for a quivering lip or a blushing scintilla or a twisting of a strange ring.

All he got was the sharp snark that he decided made up much of Will's defensive artillery.

“No, I totally *craved* wasting a quarter tank of gas getting to you. Baltimore’s a bit out of the way, you know.”

Hannibal frowned. The prelude on the radio ended, and the baritone host gave an introduction for the next piece, a departure from the station’s usual fare: a series of art songs by Mendelssohn. As the soprano began to sing, Hannibal tapped his fingers against the steering wheel in time with the piano, trying to work out the accompaniment without having to search for the sheets later. He gave up when a white sedan merged too close ahead of him and he had to brake harder than he liked.

Trying to press back the irritation that rose in his chest, Hannibal cleared his throat and said, “Jack doesn’t reimburse your travel?”

“He does,” Will said, seeming not entirely pleased to be on the same topic. “Still doesn’t mean I wanted to do it.”

Horns began to honk in every direction around them, and Hannibal glanced at his watch, wondering if Jack had the whole afternoon free to wait for them. Likely not, he figured. But nothing could be done about the traffic, and anyway, Hannibal was happy to spend more time with Will, even if he was alone in that sentiment. He knew that it would be mutual eventually. He would make sure of it.

“We’ve all got responsibilities we’d rather not have,” he said in the brief pause between two of the art songs. He’d lost track of which one this was, either five or six, but now he didn’t much care, because he was too interested in the way Will’s lips pulled back, a barely masked sneer—not dissimilar to the one he wore when discussing Jack Crawford.

“Oh yeah?” Will asked, raising a brow into a sour expression that was somewhere between mocking and doubtful.

A thread of irritation yanked at Hannibal, in part for his passenger’s irreverence, but equally for his own desires, which were fighting against the barriers of his subconscious. At once he wanted to gut Will and fuck him, shut him up by cutting out his tongue and by kissing him. His self control was crumbling, slowly, but still much faster than ever before against any other threat.

Will didn’t smirk, but the edge of his scintilla serrated like a steak knife’s blade. More confident, as if he could sense Hannibal’s own uncertainty. “What’s yours, Dr. Lecter, who can cancel appointments at will and still drive a Jag?”

Snapping himself together with enough force he could feel his teeth grinding, Hannibal pushed his shoulders down and gripped the steering wheel tighter. Traffic began to move, and he was quick on the acceleration and quicker on the brakes once they finally made it to their exit. He was happy to give his own deflection, happy to ignore the question like the joke he insisted to himself it must have been.

Except for once, Will wasn’t backing down, and he prodded Hannibal on, saying, “Well?”

“The most burdensome ones are those we cannot share.” He was startled at how dark and bitten off his own voice sounded, how harsh the words were across his tongue. Shame curled at the back of his throat, for allowing a patient to ruffle him, for letting his skills with the language regress until he sounded like every other failure on his uncle’s estate. For getting distracted from his work because of an intriguing man with pretty hair and an inexplicable glow. What was he, a teenager again? Making all the same mistakes?

Will was smiling again, and that was its own distraction. “That’s a cop out,” he said, crossing his legs now, then uncrossing them and crossing them the other way. Hannibal wanted to crash the car, to run a red and let some government vehicle ram into the passenger side door. Corpses relieved themselves, and the piss stains would take the sheen off Will’s beauty. He hoped the scintilla would die off with Will, so he wouldn’t have to wonder about it anymore.

“I’m sure you’ll discover the truth someday,” he said as evenly as he could. But he couldn’t quite help the edge in his tone as he said, “I’ve heard you’re very good at that.”

The radio’s volume spiked, halfway through a shrill high note, and Hannibal didn’t jump to turn it off, although he couldn’t help the flinch of his shoulders. The look he shot Will then was something of an expectant glare, not willing to be outdone. If Will wanted to prod for answers, Hannibal would do the same.

Will must have recognized that Hannibal was no longer amused, because he shrank into himself, squeezing himself tight against what Hannibal assumed must have been a series of bodily instincts. Will cleared his throat, turning to look out the window again. “It…” He didn’t finish his thought until they rounded the last corner and the Hoover building appeared like the light at the end of the tunnel. The embers of the shameless pleasure Hannibal had felt through the morning faded to ash as Will twisted his ring around his finger and said, “It comes naturally.”

***

Hannibal had been in Jack’s office once before—a few weeks ago when he’d first met Will Graham, before he knew that he’d be tasked with fixing him—but it didn’t make the space any more familiar or comfortable. Brutalism was an architectural style that Hannibal preferred to avoid, but to their credit, the FBI had made a strong effort to soften the interior by installing too many overhead lights and choosing brighter colors and softer wood tones. Still, he couldn’t forget the overwhelming weight of concrete hanging over his head, held up only by more concrete. Rather like his mood, he thought sourly as he sat across from Jack in the man’s office. Will had excused himself to the bathroom as soon as they’d made it in.

“So, how was your first session with Will?” Jack asked, leaning back in his chair and lacing his fingers over his stomach. He looked younger, or perhaps just more relaxed now than when he’d come to Baltimore a week ago. “Have you made any progress with him?”

“As I told you before, Agent Crawford,” Hannibal said, crossing his legs, “what you’ve asked me to do is a slow process.”

Jack nodded as if he hadn’t been hoping for a miracle. But Hannibal could see the disappointment in his eyes, and then he was unintentionally comparing Jack’s masking skills to Will’s. His appreciation for Will’s ability to hide himself multiplied as Jack winced and said, “Yes, of course, Dr. Lecter. But have you made any progress at all?”

He had, he figured, although it had been in the wrong direction. Or, more accurately, the wrong direction for Jack. Hannibal himself was rather inclined to keep down the wrong direction until it proved a destination. That was the curse of curiosity, he supposed. But this direction was a hundred times more compelling, and maybe, in a roundabout way, he’d fix Jack’s problem, too. But that would already take months, if not years, so what was a few sessions’ detour in the grand scheme of things?

“Some, yes.” Glancing at the door, as if Will would silently reappear behind him, Hannibal smoothed the material of his trousers over his raised knee. When he looked at Jack again, his stare intense but without heat, he said, “My work is much harder if I don’t have my patient’s complete history.”

An obvious flash of confusion crossed Jack’s face, followed by poorly concealed annoyance and settling into the commendable but flimsy blankness of professionalism. “I’m sorry, Dr. Lecter? I’ve given you everything of relevance in Will’s history. His entire resume, his previous psychological profiles, his incident in the field—”

“But not his address.”

Jack didn’t even attempt to mask his surprise. “His address?”

Shrugging, Hannibal said, “He also mentioned a moment of retaliation against the Bureau. Surely *that* is relevant to my work, if you want me to prevent such things in the future. He wouldn’t elaborate on this instance. Would you like to, or would you rather I take my time in discovering it?”

Realization seemed to dawn on Jack, and he sighed, leaning forward to brace himself against the heft of his desk. “Right. That was an oversight.” Jack looked at the door much in the same way Hannibal had, but still there was no Will, so he sighed again, heavier this time, and began his explanation. “His ring, I’m sure you’ve seen it. He’s worn it every day ever since I met him. It’s…” He paused, apparently deciding how to explain himself, and finally said, “It helps him with his work. A sort of lucky charm, I guess. But a couple months ago, in the field, he was getting obsessive about it. Wouldn’t stop playing with it. So I took it from him, just to clear his head.”

Hannibal frowned immediately. “You took it from him?”

“Another agent said that’s how you curb things like toy aggression in dogs.”

Unable to help his incredulous scoff, Hannibal said, “In *dogs*, maybe. Is Will a dog to you, Agent Crawford?”

Jack slumped into his ribcage, reaching up to rub his face. “I was desperate. It was keeping him from doing his work. So I took it. Or, rather, had Beverly take it. But she and every other person that handled the damned thing ended up with splitting headaches, nausea, so on. We thought it was heat stroke, but it kept going into the night until he got his ring back. So maybe it was food poisoning instead.” He pressed his lips together, finding that explanation as convincing as Hannibal did—which was to say, not at all. “I wouldn’t call it retaliation as much as a terrible coincidence.”

“That doesn’t make sense,” Hannibal said flatly.

Jack’s expression said he knew it, even if he wasn’t willing to say as much. So instead he said, “He’s been gone a while. Shouldn’t take this long to pee. Maybe you should go find him? Make sure he hasn’t fallen in.”

Narrowing his eyes, Hannibal considered demanding that Jack tell him the truth. But he thought better of it, deciding that if Jack was that desperate to keep his secret, it must have been a secret worth keeping. Those were the kind of secrets that could only be discovered the hard way. So Hannibal nodded and stood up, buttoning his jacket and saying, “Our government has splashed out for toilets large enough for a grown man? I dare say I’m impressed.”

“The renovations and fiscal irresponsibility know no end, Doctor,” Jack said as Hannibal left. He closed the door behind him to keep himself from turning and asking if his employment was its own irresponsibility. His fees could have been spent on replacing the overhead fluorescents with LEDs that could mimic the warmth of sunlight.

He found the bathroom without trouble, and was unimpressed with its garish red paint. Clearly whoever had made that decision was unfamiliar with the psychology of color—an entirely legitimate study, although limited in its practical uses—and the result was a series of strangely aggressive urinals with two stalls at the far end. The bathroom was empty except for Hannibal and the pair of boots visible under the door of the rightmost stall, which was the larger of the two and handicap accessible.

If it had been anyone else, any other pair of shoes, Hannibal wouldn’t have recognized him.

“Jack is worried about you, Will,” he said once he stepped up to the stall. Through the gap between the door and the frame, Hannibal could see a sudden shuffling that sounded like fabric and something heavier.

Will’s laugh seemed forced. “So you *are* my handler. Well, I’ll warn you now. He’s always worried. Being worried is part of him, as much as being provocative is part of you.”

A small grin pulled at Hannibal’s lips, and his irritation with Will that lingered from their drive dissolved. “Provocative?” He tried the stall door. It was locked. “You’re not wrong, I suppose. It’d be hard to do my job without asking questions.”

“You know what I meant,” Will said through the door. Hannibal jostled the door again, hoping the latch bar would slip out of the strike and let him in. Just as he thought he might be making progress, he saw Will’s hand come to cover the lock, holding it in place. The scintilla around his fingers was larger now, peaking like solar flares several inches away from Will’s skin. “Stop that,” Will said. “Don’t you know you’re not supposed to open the door when someone’s using the shitter?”

Hannibal raised a brow even though Will couldn’t see him. “You’re not using it, are you?” An aftershock of amusement hit as he realized that he *was* rather inclined to provocation, after all.

There was more shuffling before the door came open. Hannibal immediately focused on Will, who looked more tense than he should have and whose scintilla was much more obvious than ever, before he looked past Will and saw the changing table on the wall, pulled down and holding Will’s open weekender bag. He stifled a frown as Will shifted to stand in front of the changing table.

“What were you doing?” Hannibal asked simply, letting himself hope for a truthful answer although he considered it unlikely.

Will swallowed, his Adam’s apple bobbing enough to distract Hannibal. At Will’s neck was a new piece of jewelry, a large pendant hanging from a thin chain. Will seemed to notice the shift in Hannibal’s gaze, and he cleared his throat, pulling his sport coat tighter to hide the necklace, as he said, “You know, they just put these diaper changing things in all the men’s rooms. Very progressive, very admirable, probably very expensive. I’m just putting them to use. So they don’t regret the investment.”

“In the Bureau’s fathers? Who bring their infants to work?” Hannibal took a step closer to Will, who stepped back until he bumped into the edge of the changing table.

Glancing over Hannibal's shoulder, as if he could escape or hide from anyone who happened to come in at that moment, Will said, "Exactly. If they realize no one uses them, they'll take them out. And then, if anyone *does* need to use them, they're shit out of luck." An awkward chuckle punctuated the tension between them. "Ha. Shit, get it? Since it's, uh," Will looked at him just long enough for Hannibal to see the desperation in his eyes, "diapers."

Hannibal stepped even closer, until Will nearly had to lean back to avoid being within six inches of him. Hannibal thought he could feel the warmth of Will's scintilla, the strange and biting edge of it, the ethereal power that increased the closer to Will he got. Curiosity drove him when every ethical framework fought back. It was good for his curiosity, he supposed, that he'd never been one for a strict code of ethics. Morality was meddlesome, and life was more interesting when one asked every question and got every answer. And at the moment, Hannibal wanted to know what was on that changing table and why Will didn't want him to know.

Looming over him, Hannibal tried to see around Will's chest and shoulders. Although obscured by the scintilla's visual aura, which was like that of a migraine but with an effect closer to a heat shimmer, he could see the changing table was covered by a mess of crystals and a careful arrangement of marks that looked to be drawn in—

Before Hannibal could make out what all he was seeing, Will pressed up into him, pulling him close by the lapels until the heft of his ring pressed firmly into Hannibal's chest, and kissed him hard.

At once, every thread of Hannibal's intellect unraveled until he was acting on nothing but instinct, which he had always considered the most dangerous level of existence. Mostly because bodies would do anything, in moments like that, to fight or fuck or feel whole again. And yet, against the impossible heat of his lips, as if Will's scintilla slipped into his mouth like his tongue, Hannibal found himself completely arrested, completely distracted, and completely driven by the basest impulses of life. The scratch of Will's stubble against his chin drove him to imagine other pleasures and other pains, and the only thing that could have made the kiss better was a splash of blood.

Wrapping his arms around Will's waist and bracing both hands against Will's ass, Hannibal picked him up just long enough to push him back onto the changing table and come to stand between his splayed legs. Later, he would realize that doing so had destroyed the very thing he had been so desperate to see, which he would also realize had been Will's intention in the first place.

But in the moment, as he nipped at Will's lip until he tasted a faint but familiar metallic tang, all he heard was Will's tiny, startled gasp, muffled by lips and tongues and teeth. It encouraged him, and his eyes fell closed when keeping them open would draw more energy away from the growing lust in his core. Just when he was no longer looking, Will's hands fell from his chest and there was another series of haphazard sounds, which hit Hannibal a moment too late. When he pulled back, feeling the cool air against his face like an awakening, Hannibal saw the last of Will's things disappearing into his weekender bag with the decisive zip of closing.

Will was breathing heavily, and when he looked back at Hannibal, his curls cutting across the sharpest point of his cheekbone, there was something nearing victory in his scintilla. Hannibal frowned. He hadn't seen the victory—no matter how closely he looked, Will's face was perfectly blank, although flushed, red lips glossy with bloody saliva—he'd felt it. As if it had been his own.

"Jack's worried," Will said as he slid off the changing table and grabbed his bag. He closed the table with a thud, and a thin gray powder clouded up around it.

Will tried to push past him, but Hannibal blocked him instinctively. His more logical brain was coming back in tendrils, in vines that took too long to root, and the first thing that came to his mind was the first thing that came from his mouth. “Will you have dinner with me tonight?”

Again, Hannibal felt rather than watched as Will debated himself, and he began to wonder if Will’s incredible empathy was somehow contagious.

And then Will seemed to decide, although Hannibal couldn’t read the decision, and he wiped his lips and their growing smirk with the wrist of his sport coat. Pushing past him, Will left the bathroom, and Hannibal had no choice but to follow, lest Jack think him incompetent or slow. He sighed as Will ducked his head, pulling the necklace off and slipping it into his pocket before Hannibal could make out the symbols on it. At this distance, feeling much too cold and weak, Hannibal couldn’t have seen anything if the pendant had been in plain view.

He took a moment to compose himself, to school his own curiosity in his uncle’s voice, before striding off after Will, pausing to look at himself in the bathroom’s mirror and remind himself that Will Graham was a job, and that he had work to do. It didn’t help.

When he made it back to Jack’s office, Will was already sitting in the other chair, with his arms crossed over his chest and his scintilla back to its more sedate, nearly invisible form. And yet, Hannibal could see it now without trouble, and he wondered if Jack could, too. He thought it wisest not to ask, though, and took his seat just as Jack said, “Will said you were quite intrigued by the new bathroom. I have to say, it’s not my own toilet, but it’s better than it was.”

“Fiscal irresponsibility can get some things right,” Hannibal said after making himself comfortable in the chair across from Jack. He glanced aside at Will, who stared resolutely at his boss.

Jack’s eyes darted between the two of them, as if he could tell something had happened but couldn’t quite say what. So instead he slid the folder on the side of his desk to the center of it, pulling a sheet of paper out and saying, “We’ve got a new lead. All three victims were contacted by the same phone number, each within a week of their deaths.”

Will perked up. “Please say there’s a name to the number.”

“Unfortunately not,” Jack said, handing the sheet over. Will had to stand to take it, and as he did, Jack explained. “It’s a number belonging to a pay phone in Baltimore.”

Hannibal raised a brow as both other men looked at him expectantly. “A fantastic coincidence. Do you know where the phone in question is located?”

Finding another piece of paper in the file, Jack handed a map to Hannibal. “About five blocks from your house, Dr. Lecter. A fantastic coincidence, indeed.”

For the first time, Hannibal felt some uncertainty about his position in the FBI’s eyes. He hadn’t considered the probability of, somehow, being accused of murders he hadn’t committed. There had always been the lingering possibility that he’d be caught for his own crimes—certainly there were enough of them—but it was a remote chance at best. Hannibal was always very careful to clean up after himself, and if he had, in fact, butchered the victims in this case, he wouldn’t have been halfway foolish enough to call each of them from the same payphone. It was too careless for his tastes. But at the very least, it made sense why Jack would ask him to accompany Will to Washington. On federal property, surrounded by federal agents, any hypothetical escape would be nearly impossible.

It didn't keep him from trying to work one out anyway, despite the fog of arousal still clouding his thinking, as he cleared his throat and said, "I know the area. It's heavily surveilled by cameras. Surely you have video evidence of a caller at the expected times."

The knowledge that he wouldn't be in such videos didn't much allay his rising suspicion and heightened awareness of the space around him. He glanced at Will, who was looking at him with a curious cock of the head, as if trying to read a book written half in English and half in crude, gestural sketches. Hannibal matched the intensity of his stare, willing for the empath to sense his own displeasure with having been hoodwinked, or whatever technique the FBI called it.

"We would, yes, except one of our techies noticed that the footage is a loop. The important minutes are missing." Jack pulled a stack of images from his file and spread them out over the desk.

Hannibal studied them, intent on pointing out some other lead for the agents to follow. But all he saw was a familiar intersection, with a gas station on one corner and an old public library on the opposite corner. And stopped at a red light was a sleek black Jaguar with its plates hidden by the car behind it. But Hannibal knew his own car. Relief seeped past the tight barricade of defensive instinct, and he let out a low breath.

"You said it's a loop, right?" Hannibal didn't wait for Jack to confirm before he carried on. "That means these images aren't from the times in question. My car would have been long gone by the time the calls were made."

Jack frowned, shooting Will a confused look.

Beside him, Will laughed. "Now *that's* a fantastic coincidence." Hannibal's chest tightened, and part of him wanted to yank Will from his chair and bend him over Jack's desk and make a mess of them both. But instead the muscles of his upper body tensed until they began to twitch, and Will said to Jack, "Is it possible to get footage that hasn't been tampered with?"

"I guess that depends on whether you can get the tapes. If you can, the techies might be able to recover whatever was overwritten."

That same dark smirk from the bathroom stretched across Will's lips again. "They don't like being called techies, do they, Jack?"

Hannibal uncrossed his legs and smoothed the material of his trousers, trying to pull himself back together. He couldn't remember the last time he'd been so rattled. He must have been a teenager still, locking himself in rooms as far away from his uncle as he could, trying desperately to shield Mischa's body with his own. The memory shocked him, and when he blinked and refocused on the world around him, Will was looking at him again, just barely masking the agony flaring in his eyes. It was a familiar agony, and Hannibal pushed it away as quickly as he could.

Jack was going on, apparently unaware. He could have been burning at the stake and he'd still have asked, "So, are you planning to go back to Baltimore, Will? It'd be easy enough to visit the gas station or try to find footage from some of the private cameras in the area."

Just as quickly as Hannibal had squashed the feeling that was somewhere between rage and misery, Will did the same. His expression as he looked at Jack was one of feigned irritation. "I have to. My car is still there. Hannibal has missed his calling as a chauffeur."

“Ah.” Jack seemed unsure of the answer, but he didn’t push it. A smart man, after all, Hannibal decided, just as soon as he finished deciding whether or not to take offense to being called a chauffeur. Surgery and psychiatry, while much higher paid professions, weren’t entirely dissimilar to driving. Something about delicate coordination and a willingness to be alone while surrounded by a perfect chaos. The tacit trust to handle lives and deliver them safely on the other side. The list could go on, and Hannibal was inclined to indulge it, but Jack nodded appraisingly and said, “Very eco-conscious.”

Hannibal couldn’t help his small grin, and when he glanced at Will, Will was glaring at him without heat. Standing and buttoning his jacket, Hannibal cleared his throat and said, “Well. It’s nearing dinnertime. We ought to get going, especially if our dear Will intends to go home tonight. Virginia, you said?”

“Wolf Trap,” Jack offered helpfully, until he caught the edge of Will’s glare and reached up to rub the back of his neck.

Will pursed his lips until he looked like a pouting puppy begging for a bone, and Hannibal nearly couldn’t stand it. Following Hannibal’s lead, Will stood and pulled his bag over his shoulder, saying, “It would have been more eco-conscious just to let me drive.”

“Well,” Hannibal said, reaching out toward the door for Will to lead the way, “perhaps it’s a good excuse for dinner.” He smiled back at Jack. “You and your wife are also more than welcome to join me whenever you’re in Baltimore, Agent Crawford. The empty table is the loneliest one.”

Jack nodded, pulling all the papers spread across his desk back into the file folder. “I’ll see what I can do, Dr. Lecter. If anything, I’ve heard you’ve missed your calling as a chef.”

“I’m flattered.” And he was, truly. He gave Will an expectant look, and Will held firm for a moment before deflating slightly, just a tiny shift in his shoulders and a sideways glance. “We should be going, Will. A meal doesn’t prepare itself. Most times.”

Will sighed and hitched his bag over his shoulder again. “I don’t eat raw fish anymore.”

Smiling, Hannibal said, “I think that can be accommodated.”

After a series of awkward goodbyes that ended with a formal dismissal, Hannibal followed Will out of Jack’s office and through the building until they came into the blessed sunlight and Hannibal could finally breathe again. Will paused in front of the building’s entrance and looked up at Hannibal, squinting against the sun. His scintilla flickered around him, catching in his hair and on the glisten at the inner edge of his lower lip. There was nothing Hannibal wanted to do more in that moment than take Will’s jaw in his hands and kiss him, to feel the stubble against his palms, to be taken into his scintilla once again and feel its impossible and inexplicable power.

“You know,” he said, and Hannibal could immediately hear the playful tease in his voice, “chauffeurs usually don’t talk so much. You could learn a thing or two.” And then he turned on his heel and strode off toward the parking garage, leaving Hannibal behind for the second time that day.

***

The drive back to Baltimore was mostly quiet, except for the radio in the background and the occasional flipping of pages as Will read through Hannibal’s copy of *The Crucible*. At several

points through the drive—when traffic was sluggish, or when a comment popped into his mind suddenly, or when the sunlight caught on Will's ring and made it shimmer like no stone Hannibal knew—he wanted nothing more than to ask Will one question. But he knew himself, and one question would then become a dozen, and Will would get testy with him again, playing with the radio like a petulant child. But unlike most petulant children, Hannibal found Will quite endearing, if endlessly baffling.

So instead of speaking, Hannibal spent the drive forming a list of possible—although not always plausible—explanations for the enigma that was Will Graham. It was a short list, and one that relied too much on the sort of scientific phenomena that defied concrete understanding. Unnamed phenomena that would someday be as well understood by the layperson as gravity but for now was at the same level as quantum theory.

In fact, by the time Hannibal pulled up at his home, he had decided with a great deal of reluctance that he wouldn't learn anything without talking, and talking would have to wait, so there was no reason to get worked up yet. That wasn't to say it was easy for him not to get worked up; the opposite, in fact. But if there was anything Hannibal had in spades, it was a strict discipline, which masqueraded as an appreciation for delayed gratification and a sudden desire to plan a meal that would charm Will enough that he'd be more willing to talk.

"Oh," Will murmured, looking up at Hannibal's house as the Jaguar's engine cut out.

A low thread of pride twined through Hannibal, and he smiled at Will as he unbuckled his seatbelt. "I believe I have all the ingredients necessary for a melilot porcelet with glazed turnips and rhubarb," he said, standing and closing the car door behind him, careful not to leave fingerprints in the wax. He shrugged out of his jacket and draped it over his arm. "Unless, of course, you had another menu in mind."

Will followed suit, stopping to pull his bag out of the trunk. He kept it tucked behind him, as if Hannibal could see through its thick leather walls. Reaching up to rub at the scruff of his cheek, Will said, "I don't know what a melly-whatever is, but that's fine."

More pleased than the punch he had planned to go with the meal, Hannibal invited Will into his home and paused in the foyer to hang his jacket before leading him into the kitchen, where dim lights reflected across the steel top of his island.

Rolling up his sleeves, Hannibal said, "Welcome to my home, Will. It's no castle, but it's mine." Will went to the well-worn butcher block and ran a hand across its grain, his brow catching in the crags of a frown before smoothing over again, nearly before Hannibal saw it. Coming up behind Will, he said, "You can put your bag down, if you like." Will startled, turning around until he was looking up at Hannibal, much the same way he had earlier in the FBI's bathroom. Except now they were in Hannibal's home, and there was no Jack Crawford a mere hallway away. Offering Will a small smile—which he realized, in a sudden flash of secondary anxiety, was not as comforting as it should have been—Hannibal said, "I won't snoop, I promise."

Will's gaze hardened, and his lips pulled tight before he said, "Look, I know I…" He glanced away then, and his scintilla flushed, uncomfortable like a humid heat. Pulling his courage together again, something Hannibal felt viscerally as a tightening in his own gut, Will looked at him again and bit his lip. It took everything in Hannibal not to kiss him then, and he was rewarded with the shiver in Will's voice as he said, "I know I kissed you. I know you liked it. I know you want me."

"Yes," Hannibal said simply. There was no point in dancing around it.

His response only elicited a heavy sigh from Will, who brushed past him and tossed his bag on the arm chair in the corner of the kitchen. Hannibal turned to watch him, and the further Will got, the fainter the vague anxiety in Hannibal's gut felt, leaving Hannibal's own arousal louder now. He frowned, but Will didn't face him again, just put his hands on his hips and stared at the joining of the walls, as if they could hide him. "Right. But it can't happen."

Swallowing back his instinctual reaction to push forward, pin Will against the wall, and demand a reason why, Hannibal sucked in a deep breath through his nose and held it until his chest burned. Once he let it out in one steady go, he said, "If I make you uncomfortable, Will, perhaps you should ask Jack for a new psychiatrist. I would be happy to give you a referral."

"No, you wouldn't. You'd be devastated." Will's voice was sharper, and he took another step into the corner of the room, putting more space between them. "Maybe Jack doesn't notice, but I do."

Hannibal frowned. "I'd apologize, but it would imply that your assumption is correct," he said, turning to busy himself with preparing the punch. He pulled an elaborate crystal punch bowl from one cabinet and set it on the island. "I won't deny that you intrigue me, even more than most patients, but to say I would be devastated not to have you as a patient undermines my professional boundaries."

Will snorted as Hannibal knelt and pulled a bottle of wine from a rack beside the refrigerator. When he stood, Will was glaring at him, arms crossed over his chest. But he'd taken off his sport coat and draped it over his bag, so it was just the thin material of his check shirt that strained over a musculature that was more defined than Hannibal had expected.

"Boundaries, sure. I'm not good with those."

Pulling a corkscrew from a drawer, Hannibal opened the bottle of wine and poured its contents into the punch bowl. He tried to keep his entire focus on the foil and cork and glass, but he couldn't help but glance back at Will every few moments. He was still standing there in the corner, rolling up the sleeves of his shirt. Hannibal had known that Will wasn't scrawny, but he hadn't expected the cut of his biceps or the cords of his forearms, dusted with dark hair, or the narrowness of his waist that had hidden under the coat or the handgun that sat in a holster at his hip. Hannibal couldn't recall if Will had been wearing it in the FBI's bathroom, and he was vaguely ashamed that he'd been too preoccupied to notice.

"What does Jack want you to do? Normal psychiatrists don't play babysitter or…whatever this is." Will finally stepped out of his corner, coming to stand in the middle of the kitchen. Not close enough for Hannibal to sense him again, but close enough that he could see the tension in Will's jaw and shoulders.

Hannibal took a bottle of his second-best brandy and mixed a long pour into the bowl. Reaching with one hand for an orange from his fruit bowl and with the other hand a long knife, he said, "You said it yourself, you're his toy. No one likes a broken toy."

"Hannibal."

A shiver threatened at the base of Hannibal's neck, and he peeled the orange with the blade pointing toward him, half hoping his hands would slip and he'd have blood to distract him from the way his name came, sounding strangled and tight like a curse, from Will's lips. Briefly he debated the consequences of revealing the task that Jack had given him. As one curl of orange peel fell into the punch bowl and he started on the next, Hannibal said, "He's afraid of your rage. He's afraid

that, if you aren't convinced otherwise, you might turn that rage against him. He's afraid of losing you."

"He should be," Will said immediately, sounding more dangerous than his file would ever suggest. Hannibal glanced at him in mild surprise, and Will's scintilla was as dark as his glower, sharp and serrated and sawing back and forth in short twitches.

Slicing through the orange and dropping its pieces into the bowl with a tiny splash, Hannibal tried not to sound as aroused as he was as he said, "Does he stand to lose you, Will?"

"Yes," was the immediate response, although Will quickly amended himself with a shake of his head that sent his curls askew. "If I could escape. See, that's what's not fair. Cruel, if anything. They've got me cornered. Like a fucking dog," Will spat, stalking up to the island and pressing his palms against it, leaning in until the two men were separated only by the immovable furniture that Hannibal had spent years and a great deal of money curating but now suddenly wished would disappear. He glanced up at Will and found him with his head sinking between his shoulders, his arms spread wide, and clouds of condensation on the cold steel under his clawed fingers. Feral looking, with eyes so dark they may as well have been black, and an intensity in his scintilla that made Hannibal want to strip him down until he could see it all bared in front of him and decipher it once and for all.

The knife came to rest on the steel counter with a soft clatter, and Hannibal stood up straight, reaching for a cloth to wipe the sticky orange juice from his hands. He appraised Will for another careful moment, watching the unevenness of his breathing and feeling an inkling of a rage that wasn't his, and finally said, "What you're saying sounds like blackmail."

Will snapped, jerking upright and turning on his heel at once, striding off to the arm chair where he'd left his things. He slipped into his sport coat without unrolling the sleeves of his shirt and slung his bag over his shoulder. "I'm going to the gas station to get the surveillance tape. What time will dinner be served?"

Hannibal's pleasure soured, although his arousal didn't, and he glanced at his watch. "Around seven, although I'd appreciate help setting the table, if you can find the time for it."

"Great. See you then."

And then Will was gone, and Hannibal couldn't help the low snarl of frustration that escaped him. He snatched his knife up again and grabbed another orange from the fruit basket, just barely keeping himself from locking the doors out of spite.

***

Following the assumption that everyone was troubled, the natural conclusion was that everyone needed therapy. Even therapists—although Hannibal tended to correct those who called him a therapist only; he was a psychiatrist and had worked for his title. And of course, he had his sessions with Bedelia, but if he went to her about Will, he knew he'd be met with a strong disdain and an ethical lecture. So when he was troubled by the things Bedelia wouldn't stand for, Hannibal had another form of therapy.

Tonight it took the form of seasoning a tender, fatty cut of meat with salt, pepper, crushed fennel seeds, and a powder of dried melilot leaves. If anyone asked, it was a Boston butt cut from the shoulder of young milk-fed pig, from a farmer who called the sweet creature Merlin. In reality, it

was taken from the delicious ass of a handsome young man that Hannibal had found in a bar during his last visit to Boston. He hadn't bothered to ask the man's name, but it could have been Merlin, he supposed. And anyway, it didn't matter now, as the rub caught in the grain of the muscle. All he was now was a delicious meal and an olive branch to Will Graham.

As he began to tie the meat into a roast with a rough hemp twine, Hannibal tried to reconcile the many opposing instincts that came naturally to him. Spikes of irritation had faded into a low-grade frustration, and he had talked himself out of locking Will out or strangling him as soon as he returned—although the strangling still held its own allure. But he still wasn't sure what to make of Will's inconsistent mood. Just when Hannibal thought he might be getting somewhere, Will would deflect, yank himself away and clam up until he had come to his own peace.

It made him wish he could abide more brute force methods of persuasion.

He had already prepared, in the bottom of a roasting pan, a bouquet of fennel, rhubarb, and turnips, topped with a splash of brandy and maple syrup. As he laid the roast on its rack, he considered what Will had said about feeling like a cornered dog. It wasn't that he doubted the FBI would turn to blackmail, only that he doubted Jack would approve such measures if they weren't strictly necessary.

Hannibal sighed as he slid the roast into the oven and set a timer for two hours. He poured himself a glass of the punch and headed toward the foyer and his sitting room beyond it. But as he passed the armchair in the corner of the kitchen, a glossy shadow caught his eye, and he knelt to find his copy of *The Crucible* on the floor, tucked between the back of the armchair and the wall. Frowning, he picked it up and tucked it under his arm, whispering the remnants of lines that still lingered in his memory.

"I am a minister of the Lord," he sipped his punch and could feel it tight at his throat like a collar, "and I dare not take a life without a proof so immaculate…"

Turning on a stereo in the corner and finding his favorite recording of the Goldberg Variations, Hannibal considered going out to look for Will, to make sure he was safe, to make sure he would return. But Will had already voiced his distaste for being treated like a dog, and Hannibal intended to press Will in other ways, so he was willing to let his patient have his peace for the moment. Lounging on the couch in front of his fireplace, legs crossed and toe bobbing in time with the second variation before it dissolved into the third, Hannibal studied the back cover of his book. It was smooth again, after years of a deep crease in the lacquered paperboard. He ran his thumb over the scarless expanse and told himself that, perhaps, Will Graham just had a magic touch. The thought didn't sit as buoyant in his gut as he expected.

By the time Will returned, about fifteen minutes before the roast's timer would ring, Hannibal had read through the play in its entirety, hanging on lines that had gone hazy with the rest of the plot's details over the years.

"You'd think an FBI badge would do some good," Will said as he let himself into the house and followed the music to the sitting room. He immediately shrugged out of his sport coat again, tossing it over the arm of the couch and dropping his bag on the floor. He started pulling off his gun's holster, setting it on top of his coat and leaving himself disarmed but less than helpless.

Hannibal set his book aside and let his eyes drift up Will's body slowly, taking his time to admire the man in front of him. He was sweaty, with his curls sticking at the edges of his face and the material of his shirt darker under his arms. His scintilla seemed more diffuse now, as if stretching

as far as it could until it faded into nothingness. The soft yellow light of the sitting room filtered through it differently, like sunlight through a cloud, and it gave the effect of an ethereal halo.

Will cleared his throat, and when Hannibal's eyes snapped up to meet his, there was an uncomfortable tension he couldn't fully mask.

"Well," Hannibal finally said, standing from the couch and taking a step toward Will, "were you able to get what you needed?" He took some pleasure in being even just slightly taller than Will, although he couldn't also deny the pleasure of looking up at Will from below. Hannibal supposed he'd like seeing Will at any angle.

Giving a short nod, Will said, "Sort of." He gestured vaguely toward his bag. "Got a tape from the gas station. Clerk thinks it's the right one, but their monitor is broken, so who knows."

Hannibal nearly made some quip about the usefulness of a CCTV without the TV. But instead he took a step closer to Will and said, "The roast should be done soon. I'll pour you a glass of punch while you set the table." Will's lips twitched downward, his eyes narrowing almost imperceptibly, and Hannibal could sense a mild rankling that raised the hairs at the back of his neck. He gave Will a stern smile. "There's no such thing as a free meal, Will."

A brief staring contest followed, which Will finally broke as he turned and stalked back through the foyer and toward the kitchen, as if he already knew the house intimately. At first it irked Hannibal, but he had to admit that the prospect of a Will comfortable in his home was a deeply satisfying one. So he pushed the pang of irritable lust aside and followed after Will, trying not to imagine what his naked body would look like, bathed in a warm light that made him and his scintilla glow.

"It smells good," Will said.

Hannibal's chest swelled with barbed pride as he pulled a pile of china from the cabinets. "A bit like toasted or vanillaed hay, yes? The melilot blooms beautifully when embraced by succulent fats." He handed Will the stack of plates and added a handful of silverware on top. "Just the two place settings, please."

Without protest this time—verbal, physical, or otherwise—Will ducked through the door to the dining room, leaving Hannibal alone to ladle punch into a fresh glass and refill his own. He kept glancing at the door Will had disappeared through until the timer rang, and then he was finally distracted by the roast, which might have been the only thing at that moment that could command his attention more than Will Graham. Bedelia would call it pathetic.

The roast came out with a glossy crust, scarred by its careful binding of twine, and the vegetables were caramel soft, browned and steaming still. Hannibal held his breath as he carried the pan to the dining room. Heat sank through his oven mitt and the tips of his fingers felt close to burning as he set the dish on a delicately carved cork mat. In the light from the chandelier overhead, the steam visibly curled up from the roast and its bed of sweet vegetables, sparking Hannibal's cavalier thought the steam might have been poor Merlin's scintilla, leaving him once and for all. Although that, he supposed, raised its own questions. Namely, if anyone else in the world had this thing that Will had, this physical aura, this leeching muscle that reached out to the world.

"Looks good," Will remarked as he stood back from the table with his arms crossed over his chest. His handiwork was less pristine; one place setting was at the head of the table, and the other to its left, halfway down the long table.

Hannibal supposed he couldn't complain, since he hadn't clarified. But he still very much wanted to complain, so he let his voice be a bit sharper than before. "If you'll just move us to sit across from each other," he gestured to the table on either side of the roast, "I'll get our glasses and a carving fork and knife."

Quick to lash back, Will said, "Why do we have to sit across from each other?"

"Because it's polite."

Will didn't seem to have an argument to that, so he huffed and started to redo his work, and Hannibal made sure his back was fully turned before he allowed himself a victorious grin. As he returned to the kitchen, Hannibal paused to pull the brandy bottle back out from the liquor cabinet. He uncorked it and poured a long splash into Will's glass, and then another, shorter one for good measure.

After delivering Will's punch, Hannibal explained that the roast needed to rest for a few minutes, and that he would be back soon.

"Finally sick of talking to me, Dr. Lecter?"

Hannibal met Will's eyes as the man took his first sip of the punch, not flinching at all against the strength of it. Impressed, Hannibal said, "Never, Will. Only in need of a toilet." He gave Will a wry wink and turned on his heel to disappear back through the kitchen and foyer to the sitting room, where he immediately knelt beside Will's leather weekender bag, which still rested beside the couch. The zip was quieter than Hannibal remembered from the FBI's bathroom, and he held his breath as the bag came open, as if a puff of noxious smoke would hit him in the face. But there was no haphazard security system, just a jumble of stones and clothes and smaller bags that rustled when moved. Among the mess was an old VHS tape, which was labeled with a date about a month ago, just a week prior to the murder of the accountant.

And tucked under everything else was a black felt hat, close to a fedora in style but crumpled along the crown and with a much wider brim. Hannibal turned the hat in his hands, observing it from every angle, as if it would speak to him. Raising it to his nose to take a sniff of the leather inner band, Hannibal glimpsed a tiny embossed label at the back of the hat. A shimmer of gold mostly worn away traced along the maker's mark and an inscription in tiny script.

This ritual cover belongs to W.G. of the Mayfly Coven, est. 1833.

Hannibal frowned.

Coven? Too many coincidences hit him at once, until he could hardly believe his own willful ignorance. *The Crucible* read stronger now, but he wouldn't use it as evidence, no matter how strongly Will had reacted to it that morning in his office. He was hesitant to make any firm conclusions, although it was his nature to do so. And yet, he couldn't ignore that witchcraft—magic in one form or another—explained or could explain all of the curiosities that surrounded Will Graham. It was nearly too simple an explanation for Hannibal to accept it, so he did his best to push the suspicion aside as he carefully returned the hat to the bag and zipped it up.

There were many things Hannibal knew, many things he could be considered an expert in, many things he could talk about at length without pausing once to remember a detail. To his own chagrin, the occult was not one of them. He was appalled at himself; how could a monster like him not intimately know every dark corner of humanity?

Because his own corner, his uncle's corner, had been too much.

Gritting his teeth until his jaw ached, Hannibal stood and pressed his shoulders back, trying to focus on the allure of a fresh roast just half a house away. All he could think about was the man beside it.

He'd been too long, he realized suddenly.

When he came into the dining room again, Will had done as he'd been told and was now sitting at the far side of the table with a nearly empty glass of punch in front of him. "I won't move it all again, no matter how much you ask."

Hannibal offered him a small, forced smile before turning his focus to the roast. "No need," he said, trying not to reveal the strange blend of curiosity and arousal and a low, steeping anger that he'd been deceived. Part of him wanted to address what he'd found immediately, but doing so would have destroyed any sprout or tenuous vine of trust between them—although it was difficult to say if there was any, except, perhaps, that Will was sitting there of his own volition. Rather, as Hannibal cut the twine away from the roast, he said, "So, will you take the tape to Jack tomorrow?"

Slowly carving through the meat, which separated from itself in a tender arc, he glanced at Will, but found with some surprise—and a pleasure that grew until the steady hum of arousal in his chest was hotter than the anger—that Will was staring at his hands, as if transfixed. Hannibal lifted the first slice and carefully carried it to Will's plate, and Will's eyes followed him, pupils dilating as the meat came to rest at the center of his plate.

"Will?"

His gaze flicked up to meet Hannibal's, and a wave of brutal lust staked him through, forceful enough that Hannibal had to swallow back a small gasp. But under it was a sensation that didn't belong to him: a fear that shivered and spiraled in on itself.

Will cleared his throat, and it was enough of a jolt that Hannibal pulled back and began to carve away the next slice of meat as Will said, "Need to watch it first. Got a VCR?"

Hannibal's first instinct was to laugh, but it seemed malapropos, so he just served the vegetables instead. "Unfortunately, it didn't make the cut," he said, setting all the serving utensils aside and moving to sit across the table from Will, who watched him carefully the entire time, as if he thought Hannibal might jump over the table and attack him. With a knife, with his hands, with his lips. After a moment, Will glanced down at his plate, and Hannibal picked up his napkin to lay across his thigh. "Please," he said with a small gesture to Will, "eat."

Doing as he was told, Will picked up his silverware and slowly cut into the meat, which gave under the knife's pressure with a soft, juicy bounce. Hannibal held his breath as Will raised his fork to his lips, kept holding it as he chewed, and released it only when Will gave a small moan and swallowed. He immediately began to cut into his own portion, his mouth watering as hunger tugged in his gut.

They ate in silence for several minutes, coming to a careful and frail unspoken truce, until Will set his utensils down with a metallic clink against china and said, "It's delicious. Thank you."

"It's my pleasure," Hannibal said as he set his own silverware aside and reached for his napkin to dab at his lips. He took a moment to admire the warm flush across Will's cheeks, the soft warbling

of his scintilla, although the table put too much space between them now for Hannibal to pick up any of the emotions that seemed to travel through the strange aura. After sipping his punch, Hannibal attempted typical dinner time conversation. “Did you find anything other than the tape?”

Will ate a bite of rhubarb, chewing so slowly Hannibal thought it might have been an attempt at deflection, before finally swallowing and saying, “Concrete evidence? No. But I’ve got a few ideas.”

“Oh?”

“Nothing that would stand up in court unless I can find proof.” It would have been a casual statement, had Will’s voice not been tight and low.

Hannibal raised a brow and said, “Care to share, Will?”

Although Will’s mouth opened immediately as if to speak, he seemed to reconsider for a moment and quickly finished off his punch. Just as Hannibal was about to offer to refill his glass, Will sat back in his chair, began spinning his ring around his finger, and said, “The killer is highly organized. Structured, but creative. Very focused around the practice, but seemingly indiscriminate with his victims.” Will paused, just long enough for his eyes to pass up and down Hannibal’s body. “It’s almost certainly a ritual.”

The word ritual sank its barbs into Hannibal, and he said, “For what?”

“Could be a whole host of things,” Will said, running a hand through his hair. “To prevent being stood up at the altar. To ensure a long, fulfilling marriage. To find someone to marry.”

Hannibal frowned, staring intently at Will and trying to ignore the discomfort in his eyes. “How could you possibly know that?”

“Didn’t I say? The careful execution doesn’t match with the random vic—”

“None of which explains the logical jump to rituals.” Hannibal’s voice was harder now, and it seemed to hit Will with the same force as a slap. Will recoiled into himself, his scintilla swelling like a shield, and Hannibal suddenly felt a familiar power surging through his veins. It was the same strength that came with killing, with turning a man into an animal that could only beg for its life.

Except Will was no normal animal, or perhaps he was merely encouraged by his glass of punch, because he pressed his shoulders back and filled up all the space his physical body would allow, and then some more as his scintilla lashed out in every direction, reddish near his body and white the further it extended.

“It’s my job to jump to conclusions,” Will snapped, baring his teeth in a sneer that he didn’t even attempt to hide. It was almost refreshing, although Hannibal couldn’t get a word in edgewise as Will kept at him. “Why else does Jack hold me hostage? Because I’ve got an intuition that no one else has!”

Hannibal paused, let the outburst settle between them. “No one?”

Will’s brow furrowed, and a slow, cold realization dawned in his eyes. He glared at Hannibal and said, “You said you wouldn’t look.”

“I can’t help you unless you’re honest with me, Will. Can you explain what I saw? Or your… intuition?”

The ring at Will’s finger caught the light as he spun it, a typical anxious habit. “How do I know I can trust you? You’re on Jack’s payroll. You’re,” Will paused, biting his lower lip until it was just as red and glossy as it had been in the FBI’s bathroom, “you.”

Arousal and something softer curled in Hannibal’s chest, and he offered Will a gentle smile as he said, “It doesn’t matter who pays my fees. I work with my patients’ best interests in mind. I want to help you for *you*, not for Jack.” He reached for his utensils again and cut himself a small bite of meat. Letting the fork hang in the air before he ate it, he said, “You can trust me second only to yourself.”

Will glanced down at his own plate as Hannibal ate. With a sigh, he followed suit.

***

They ate again in silence until both of their plates were cleared. Will held his empty punch glass close to his chest, swirling the lingering drops that collected at the bottom.

“Come, there’s plenty of punch left,” Hannibal said as he stood and collected their plates. The rest of the roast sat on the table, slowly cooling. It would save well enough, and Hannibal hated anything to go to waste. Like the rest of Merlin’s body, tucked away in his cellar, the roast would be kept for another day.

As he stood, Will’s balance wavered, and he said, “I shouldn’t. Already too close to not being able to drive home.”

Hannibal smiled as he carried the dishes into the kitchen and set them in the sink. “You’re welcome to stay the night. If you do, perhaps you can make another visit to the pay phone in the morning. The killer must live close by, if your intuition can be of any help.” He glanced at Will, who stood near the punch bowl but was carefully studying Hannibal instead.

“I’m not sure that’s a good idea, either, Hannibal.” Will swallowed heavily, and once again Hannibal couldn’t help but focus on the way his Adam’s apple bobbed. His scintilla purpled slightly, and he suddenly turned his back, reaching for the ladle to fill his glass.

It was Hannibal’s own sort of instinct to come up behind Will, reaching his arms around him to take the glass and ladle from his hands and do the job himself. Will pressed back into his chest, his body deliciously hot and firm under his check shirt, and Hannibal bent to whisper into his ear, “I can feel it, you know. That you want me, too.” As he finished filling the glass, Will turned to face him, caught between Hannibal’s body and the counter behind him, with arms on either side. Thoroughly trapped.

“What?” Will asked, sounding genuinely confused. His eyes searched Hannibal’s face, and Hannibal set the glass down on the counter, lest it spill and make the floor sticky as they moved into each other.

“Your scintilla,” Hannibal began to explain, using one hand to vaguely trace the enigma’s outline, hovering just a few inches from Will’s skin. “Whenever I’m close enough to touch it, I can feel your feelings. Your empathy works both ways, it seems.” His lips quirked up in something that might have been considered a smirk as Will’s eyes went wide.

Glancing down between their bodies, Will reached out to brush a hand across Hannibal's chest. The touch was hot, flamelike in how the scintilla around Will's hand—always one of its most prominent areas, Hannibal had noticed—licked out across the material of Hannibal's shirt. Hannibal pressed into the touch, and as he did, Will looked up at him again, frowning slightly. Not angry this time, that much Hannibal was sure of, but curious. The way Hannibal was.

"Scintilla?" Will echoed, his voice low enough that it was nearly masked by the music still coming from the sitting room. "That's…" he sighed, "not what we usually call it." Hannibal finally thought he was getting somewhere, and a small shock of victory ran up his back, which made Will flinch back, shaking his head. "You shouldn't really be able to see it."

Hannibal shifted back just enough to give Will the room to breathe, but Will followed him, although he let his hand fall back to his side. "What is it, Will?"

There was a moment in which Hannibal thought he might have made the grave mistake of pushing too hard too fast—the very thing he'd warned Jack against—but after a long silence, in which Hannibal could sense Will's contemplative anxiety, Will spoke.

"It's usually called an aura, power field, domain. Doesn't matter. It's how we interact with the world, how we use our…"

Hoping to encourage Will, Hannibal stepped closer again, so close Will swallowed back a tiny gasp. "Magic?" he asked, reaching up to cup Will's jaw. "Correct me if I'm wrong."

Will's laugh was small and breathy, a shy sort of nervous, and he leaned into the touch as he said, "No, you're not wrong." He took a deep breath and stared into Hannibal's eyes, and Hannibal could feel him hoping for something, although there was no telling what it was. Will covered the hand at his cheek with his own, brushing his thumb across the back of Hannibal's hand. "If I tell you, Jack can't know, or he'll make me see someone else instead."

"You can trust me, Will."

The warmth that flooded through him should have been enough to cook him alive, and Hannibal had to steady himself against it as Will nodded and said, "Right, then."

There was still a reluctance in his voice, in his scintilla, and an idea suddenly hit Hannibal. If he could be felt unintentionally, perhaps he could learn to use it as a tool. Focusing as hard as he could, Hannibal attempted to send courage through the bond between them. Reassurance wasn't one of Hannibal's strengths, but it came naturally now, as he silently invited Will to confide in him. Will glanced up at him, blue eyes wide with surprise. A small smile pulled at his lips, the most beautiful smile Hannibal had ever seen, before it disappeared as quickly as it came and he confessed.

"I'm a witch."

Hannibal initiated their kiss this time, reaching up with his other hand to steady Will's face as he bent down to press his lips to Will's. A jolt of energy traveled through to the base of Hannibal's skull, and he fought not to slip into that too-easy realm of pure arousal, where his mind ceased to work critically and his better judgement faded to pure instinct. And yet, no matter how much he fought to focus on the soft heat of Will's lips, or the scratch of his stubble, or the illicit pleasure—it might have belonged to him or to Will, he couldn't quite tell, and he didn't much care—no matter

how much he tried to ground himself in the moment, he was lost in a sort of haze, where he toed the line between conscious awareness and pure sensation.

When Hannibal pressed further into him, Will stepped back until he bumped into the counter just beside the punch bowl. It came naturally to Hannibal to drop his hands from Will's jaw and haul him up to sit on the counter and step between his splayed legs, not unlike how he had in the FBI's bathroom. The sequence was more fluid now, and Will wrapped his arms around Hannibal's neck, pulling him closer.

A low moan broke their kiss, and when Hannibal pulled back to take a deep breath, he was stunned by the soft, sultry look on Will's face. His cheeks were flushed, and his hair, shining from the overhead lights, made him appear magical like nothing else. Hannibal didn't think he could have wanted Will any more than he did then, but then Will looked up at him through his eyelashes and licked his lips. His voice was rough with that familiar sarcasm as he said, "That's not how most people respond."

"Perhaps you haven't noticed," Hannibal said, not caring that he was about to say something exceptionally corny, "but I'm not most people."

Will's eyes glittered as he laughed, and he wrapped his legs around Hannibal's hips as he reached down for the glass of punch. Hannibal let his hands come to rest on Will's thighs, and he wasn't careful about hiding his victorious satisfaction as Will drank the punch in one long gulp.

"I probably shouldn't let you drive home, seeing as you've had a fair bit to drink," Hannibal said, raising a teasing eyebrow. He took the empty glass from Will, purposefully letting his fingers brush Will's, and set it aside again. "You're welcome to the guest room, if you like. Or—"

"What?" Will asked, feigning anger—Hannibal could feel the giddy, drunken delight under his hands, surrounding him. "You don't want to sleep with me anymore?"

Hannibal's hands drifted up to Will's waist, pulling the material of his shirt out of his trousers as he went. After leaning in to press a set of traveling kisses up the sharp edge of Will's jaw, Hannibal said, his voice nothing more than a murmur, "We won't do much sleeping."

"Alright," Will said simply, although he was breathless as he ran a hand through Hannibal's hair. It was a touch that shocked Hannibal with its conflicting gentleness and insistence. "Then we'll fuck."

The buttons of Will's shirt gave little resistance as Hannibal pulled it open, eager to run his hands across Will's skin, to feel him without a scintilla—or whatever one wanted to call it, although Hannibal was partial now to his own creation—between them. Will's stomach was warm under his touch, and the muscles under soft skin tensed at the contact just as Will sucked in a sharp breath. Hannibal kissed him again, pressing his own hips into the edge of the counter and suddenly realizing how hard he was.

One of Will's hands snaked around Hannibal's waist and clawed at his lower back, clutching his shirt so hard Hannibal might have worried about the garment stretching if he wasn't otherwise enthralled by the instinctual desire to bite Will's lip to bleeding.

"Hannibal," Will moaned, letting his head fall back as Hannibal kissed and nipped down his neck instead. "Stop, I have to do something first."

He stole another kiss at Will's shoulder as he pushed the check shirt away from his chest before pulling back and brushing a thumb across Will's nipple. "Do what?"

Will rested his palms against Hannibal's chest and pushed him away. Not with any real force, but enough to catch his breath and slip down off the counter. His shirt draped off his shoulders, staying up only by virtue of his muscular arms. Swallowing heavily, Will slid his thigh between Hannibal's legs, pressing against his erection and revealing his own. "A ritual," he said with a wink before darting out of the kitchen. Hannibal didn't hesitate to follow.

When he came into the sitting room, Will was kneeling at his bag, properly shirtless now. A lump of check material hid behind the couch. As Hannibal came up behind him, Will stood and put on his hat, turning to meet Hannibal's eyes.

He was wearing his pendant again, which shimmered against his bare chest, and yet another piece of jewelry: a small earring in his right ear. Just a small, gold crescent moon dangling between two soft curls. Hannibal's breath caught in his throat, and he let his gaze drift slowly from Will's face down to where his trousers pulled at his crotch and then back up again, lingering at the dusting of dark hair that disappeared into his waistband, the pendant that fell level between his nipples, and the quietly expectant intensity in his eyes.

"Stand very still," Will commanded, taking a careful step closer to Hannibal, who was happy to comply. When Will raised his hand, Hannibal noticed the stone of his ring had begun to glow much brighter than he'd ever seen before, and the tips of Will's fingers looked wet. As Will reached out to paint a stripe down Hannibal's face, from the middle of his forehead down his nose and over his lips and rounding his chin, he could smell a potent, herbaceous oil that he identified as containing basil and lavender at least, although there were deeper notes he'd never come across before. And then Will pressed his thumb against his lips and murmured something Hannibal couldn't understand.

Hannibal felt a subtle shift in his throat, like a mild allergic reaction, and his tongue flicked out to lick Will's thumb. When Will pulled back, a mellow disgust crossing his eyes, Hannibal said, "What exactly was that for, Will?"

"It's for your protection."

Unsatisfied with that response, Hannibal frowned and stepped closer, wanting to push him over the arm of the couch and pin Will under his own weight. "Protection against what?"

Will's ephemeral guilt didn't go unnoticed, and Hannibal frowned as Will did. "Not what," Will said, forcing his face blank again before replacing the small frown with a slight smile that didn't fully reach his eyes. "Who." Hannibal didn't have to ask what that meant. He knew, even if he didn't know why. But Will clarified anyway as he began unbuttoning Hannibal's shirt from the collar down. "Spoiler alert. It's me."

The slight growl to Will's voice sent a jolt of heat through Hannibal, pooling between his hips, and he felt his cock twitch in anticipation. He raised an eyebrow and glanced down at Will's bag before he said, "Take what you need and follow me."

Once Will slung his bag over his shoulder, Hannibal took his hand, turned on his heel, and led him through the house to his bedroom. As pleasant as the idea of pushing Will over a kitchen counter or a couch was, he was eager—a surprise even for himself—to hold Will in his arms as they fell

asleep, and the prospect of a great post-sex migration took some of the appeal away from impromptu locations.

Will paused at the threshold and gestured to his bag and pendant, saying, “Do you mind if I?”

Hannibal shook his head and watched in curiosity as Will fished a small bag out of his weekender, unzipping it and pulling out a small bundle of dried herbs tied around a candle. A small lighter followed, and soon, smoked sage filled the air, so strong Hannibal had to clear his throat against it.

“Sorry,” Will said as he traced around the perimeter of the room. He paused at the far side of the bed and glanced at Hannibal, looking him over once with lust visible in his eyes, and he said, “Strip.”

Some strange compulsion twined through Hannibal’s own desire, and he was sliding out of his own shirt before he could think twice. He came up to the small bench at the foot of his bed just as Will passed by it with the sage. Using the bench as a stool to prop his feet up on, Hannibal untied his shoes and set them aside. His trousers came off quickly, falling to a careless pile on the rug. It was unlike him to leave a mess of laundry around, but he was too focused on getting into bed—both by his own impulse and by whatever presumably magic command Will seemed to have over him.

By the time Hannibal was naked, Will had finished his circuit of the room and had returned to his bag, where he put the candle bundle away and began to dig through the rest of his things. Observing Hannibal, who stood with shoulders back and cock hard, Will smirked and said, “Do you have to have all your pants specially tailored?”

Hannibal raised a brow, tamping down a swelling pride. But his cock gave a happy twitch anyway, and he said, “I’m sure a little magic would make it easier.”

Will rolled his eyes and set a small pile of things on the floor. Then, with his back still to Hannibal and entirely too far away, he reached down to untie and pull off his shoes. Then, he began to unbutton his own trousers, hooking his thumbs under the waistband and slowly standing to slip out of them. Hannibal couldn’t completely bite back his low growl as Will’s pale, muscular ass was revealed to him, followed by strong thighs and shapely calves that were covered in dark, silky hair.

As he stepped out of his trousers, leaving him as naked as Hannibal was—so bare that his soft, pinked scintilla, jewelry, and worn hat had the same effect as lingerie—Will turned and let himself be seen. He was as hard as Hannibal was, maybe a bit shorter in length but formidable in girth, and Hannibal swallowed heavily, no longer denying the fierce lust in his core. He was about to demand that Will come closer when Will did so without being told.

They stood chest to chest, their cocks brushing each other, and the look Will gave him then was entirely wicked. Hannibal canted his head down to press a kiss to Will’s lips, but hot hands caught on his chest, and Will whispered against his lips, “Go on, get in bed.”

Hannibal’s eyes narrowed, not wanting to wait any longer, but he was vaguely aware that he couldn’t disobey, no matter how much he wanted to. So instead, as Will left a coy kiss on his cheek and retreated to his bag to collect the pile he’d set aside, Hannibal began turning down the linens. He positioned himself at the center of the large mattress with one leg bent, knee to the ceiling, and the other extended, watching as Will set and arranged his collection on the bedside table.

There was a handful of crystals, a tiny vial of yellowed oil, and a sachet that gave off a fine gray puff as Will opened it. He dipped his fingers into the sachet, and they came out covered with what

looked like ash, and Hannibal's first instinct was to complain about the potential mess.

But then Will climbed up onto the bed and straddled Hannibal's hips, so his hard cock, head pearly with precome, rested out across Hannibal's stomach, and so Hannibal's bobbed up against the cleft of that perfect round ass. Then his instinct was to hold Will's hips, pulling his weight harder into him. Will bit his lip, smirking down at Hannibal, and ground his hips down in one tight gyration but no more. Hannibal's moan echoed through his body, and Will pressed his clean hand against Hannibal's stomach, leaning the weight of his entire upper body over it. The band of his ring dug into Hannibal's skin, and he clenched his abs against the pressure. Schooling his breathing, Hannibal watched in curiosity as Will began to draw careful lines and curves across his chest, leaving gray streaks behind, fuzzy where it faded into the hair that dusted across his muscles.

His tongue poked out of his lips in concentration, and Hannibal had never seen anything more erotic, more intensely immaculate. He committed the image to memory to sketch later, making careful note of the tiny lock of hair that was trapped under the band of Will's hat and the focused knit of his brows and the glint of his earring and the way his pendant dangled between their bodies as Will leaned over him.

The resulting mark across Hannibal's chest vaguely resembled the insect caught mid-flight in the sculpt of his pendant. Inside a large circle that spanned the entire width of Hannibal's chest were two triangles, pointing at each other to form crude wings, with a vertical line down his sternum as the body. Horizontal lines crossed the empty space, and as soon as he finished, Will sat back and raised his fingers to his mouth, sucking them until they were clean of the remaining ash.

Hannibal's voice wobbled slightly as he said, "What is it?"

"A sigil like the one I think the killer used," Will said, reaching to the bedside table to take the crystals and spread them out on the mattress beside them. Hannibal frowned, starting to get impatient, and as Will glanced at him, he felt his wry amusement. "Don't worry, I'm not planning on killing you."

Darker than he strictly intended, Hannibal said, "You should be the one to worry if you don't hurry up." To punctuate his point, Hannibal dug his fingers into the skin at Will's hips before pulling long scratches down the length of his thighs, leaving dark welts behind. Will swallowed back a whimper, hips bucking slightly.

"Ah," Will murmured, sucking in a shuddering breath, and Hannibal thought he could see tears forming in his eyes, shifting blue, as if they had their own scintilla, and catching the light like the stone in Will's ring. The thought ravaged him, and he immediately imagined Will underneath him, bleeding and reduced to trembling sobs, stripped of whatever power he knew. Broken and hurting but closer to whole than he'd ever been. Hannibal couldn't deny his own tendency toward hero fantasies, although usually they took a darker turn, preferring corruption and pain and hungers sated with blood. And how beautiful he imagined Will would be weeping, with cheeks blotchy and red. But it was a thought for another day, Hannibal knew. For now, he had a witch and work to do.

A heady look crossed Will's face, then another tight circle of his hips, as if he could sense Hannibal's fatal desires, and he blinked away the tears too quickly. "Right."

Will worked much quicker as he laid the crystals across Hannibal's chest. The stones were cold against his skin, and his nipples peaked in response. Hannibal was sure there was some meaning behind which crystal went where, but for once, he didn't care. Grabbing Will's ass in both hands, Hannibal yanked him forward, until Will fell down over him and just barely caught himself before

their noses collided. A few of the crystals fell onto the mattress, forgotten as the two men searched each other's faces and breathed each other's breaths.

Swallowing heavily but not pulling back, Will reached blindly for the vial left on the bedside table. He pressed it into Hannibal's hand, and Hannibal was quick to uncap it and cover his fingers in the slick, fragrant oil.

He pressed his fingers against Will's entrance, and Will let out a tiny whimper, letting his head drop until the brim of his hat brushed Hannibal's forehead. "Hannibal," he murmured just as soon as Hannibal pressed one fingertip in to the first knuckle. The deeper he went, very slowly now, taking great care to spread the oil evenly, the warmer Will's scintilla was, the more Hannibal could feel it like embers settling across his skin.

Once he had two fingers inside Will, scissoring them in a gentle stretch, Will kissed him hard, slipping his tongue between his lips until they could taste each other more intimately than they had before. Hannibal savored the flavor of him, the burn of brandy that lingered from the punch, the bitter turnip, the sweet syrup. So engrossed in the kiss, Hannibal's fingers stilled, and he pulled Will into him as best he could. The kiss lasted until Will pulled back, breathless and flushed, and said, "I don't do this often."

Hannibal didn't care, and he tried to convey as much using only the empathic bond between them. Whether he was successful or not, he couldn't tell, except that Will sat back, pushing Hannibal's fingers deeper, and reached for the vial of oil. He poured a great deal in the palm of his hand and reached behind him to wrap his fingers around Hannibal's cock.

If the world had ended, Hannibal wouldn't have cared. His entire mind went blank, logical thoughts fuzzed by an impossible arousal that might have brought him to climax right then if he hadn't been so distracted by the pendant against Will's chest, intricate around the edges but dominated by an insect mid-flight. But as soon as Will touched him, the damned necklace was of no matter anymore, and Hannibal was very close to a steep precipice, before he could even have the pleasure of being deep inside Will. So he bit his tongue and held tight to Will's hips, trying not to buck his hips up too eagerly. Except he was painfully eager, unlike he'd ever been with a lover before.

"Will," he moaned, his accent more pronounced than usual. Blue eyes met his in an instant, and the spark that passed between them—Hannibal almost wished he hadn't already used the name scintilla, but this spark was much larger, much brighter, a blaze or inferno—set a deep understanding into him. He suddenly understood that his life would never be the same, would never fully satisfy him, if Will Graham wasn't in it, in one capacity or another.

And then he was in Will. It was a long, slow plunge that made Will's head fall back and his mouth open in a silent scream. Will braced himself against Hannibal's chest, one hand at the center of the sigil, as all the other crystals fell away, forgotten.

Once Will seated himself on Hannibal, he paused to take a few unsteady breaths, collecting his knees up underneath him, and then bent over and rocked forward, a long stroke that culminated with his hands carding through Hannibal's hair. Their lips were touching, but instead of kissing, they just shared the same air, gazing into each other's eyes with an intensity that Hannibal never would have expected from the man who usually refused eye contact entirely. As Will rounded his hips out again, pushing himself back down onto Hannibal's cock, he gave a breathy moan that made Hannibal's core tighten.

He let Will ride him at his own painfully slow pace for several more strokes before he couldn't take it anymore and thrust his hips up to meet Will on the downstroke. Will's gasp came out strangled, and Hannibal reached up to wrap an arm under Will's and pull the hat off, tossing it aside to be found in the morning. Twining his fingers into Will's curls, Hannibal held his head tightly and pulled it close enough to kiss him roughly. He fucked up into Will as best he could, although the angle wasn't the best, and when Will cried out in helpless pleasure, Hannibal slid his other hand between their bodies to wrap around Will's cock, stroking him in time with their thrusts.

Will began to grind his hips down into Hannibal's, clenching around him so hard Hannibal wanted to make some quip about tourniquets and blood pressure, but he had no intelligent thought, let alone breath left to do so.

The crystals were gone, as was the hat, and all Hannibal could feel now, beside the heat and weight and writhing of Will's body, was the pendant pressing between them and the tight itch of ash across his chest.

He was so close to orgasm that his vision began to swim, so he closed his eyes, focusing on the soft mewling noises Will made even when he was trying to be quiet and the carnal slap of their skin against each other. But even with his eyes closed, he could see the impression of Will's scintilla, stretching out in every direction around them, as bright as he'd ever seen. It reached out to him, and Hannibal reached back, embracing it in such a way that felt as physical as the touch of their bodies.

Will came with a loud cry, sitting up to sink as far onto Hannibal as he could and splattering the smudged sigil with streaks of his come. Hannibal couldn't bear the way Will's body clamped down around him, or the way Will's thumb brushed a nipple just right, or the way Will's lips were bleeding and wet—he couldn't remember biting them, but he realized he could taste blood on his own tongue—or the way Will's vivid ecstasy traveled though their bond and seeped into him, and it sent him over the edge. He came harder than he thought he ever had before, with a loud and indecorous grunt that he couldn't bring himself to feel shame for.

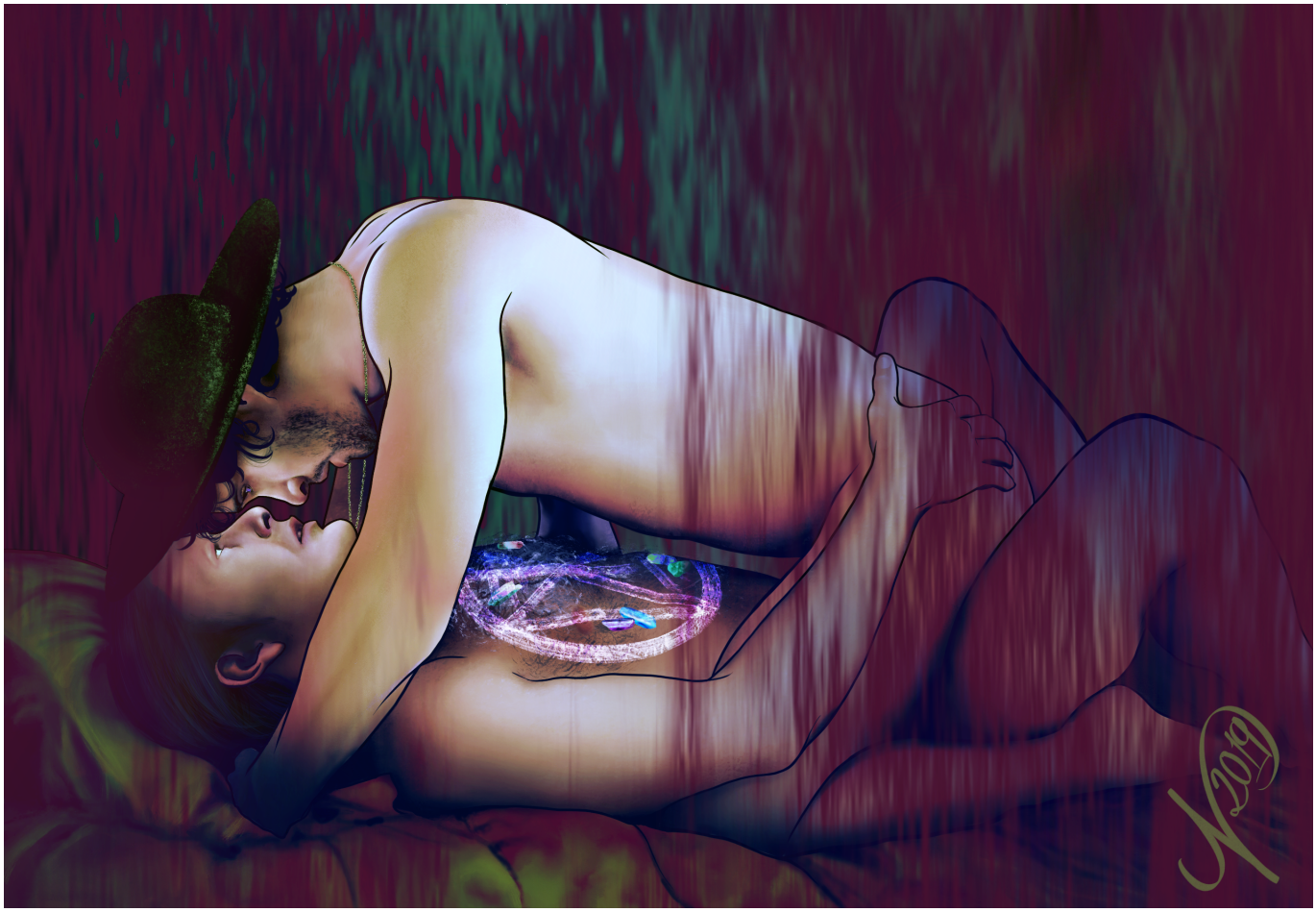
There was a brief moment, immediately after they both climaxed, that Hannibal felt like he and Will were somehow existing in the same body. He could feel Will's heartbeat, his breaths, his latent, spent power. He could feel Will's contented bliss, the very distant but underlying fear. He almost thought he could feel the way the pendant swung at its chain, hitting Will's chest with each heaving breath as if it were his own.

And then Will collapsed onto him, burying his face in the crook of his neck, and Hannibal's instinct was to wrap his arms around Will's waist and hold him close, rubbing thoughtless patterns at the small of his back. Every desire he'd had—physical and mental—was sated, at least for the night.

They laid there, in silence, for what felt like a perfect eternity, and finally Hannibal sighed and said, "We should turn off the lights and get cleaned up."

Will gave a stubborn grunt, kissing Hannibal's throat, and said into it, "Don't worry about it." And then, with a tiny surge of power Hannibal felt in his chest, the lights flickered out.

His laugh was more of a soft huff, and Will cuddled closer to him. Soon, Will's breaths were slow and steady, and his mind was calm, and Hannibal could tell without doubt that his new lover was asleep. Hannibal smiled, staring up at the ceiling for several minutes, trying to ignore all the logical thoughts that wanted to bother him. And then, before he knew it, he was drifting to sleep, too.



***

Maybe he had dreamt of what to prepare Will for breakfast, and maybe he would have remembered, if he hadn't been awoken by the shrill ringing of his telephone. Hannibal squinted against the predawn light floating in through the thin curtains pulled across the window in his bedroom. He sat up, coming to resent the telephone as an invention, no matter how useful it was. Reaching up to scratch at the mess of ash and come dried in his chest hair, Hannibal gave an undignified yelp as he accidentally shifted his weight onto crystals from the night before that collected in the depression around his hips.

Then he realized that he was alone, and that he shouldn't have been. A sudden panic set into his chest, all the residual fatigue shattered into a sharp awareness, and he looked around the bedroom frantically for any sign of Will, but there was none. His bag was gone from beside the door. Only the woody scent of sage and the remnants of their sex remained.

He jumped out of bed and didn't even bother with a dressing robe before hurrying to the telephone in his foyer. It had already gone to the message machine, and Hannibal heard his own voice, tinny through the speakers, apologizing for missing the call and asking the caller to leave their name, number, and message, and that he'd get back to them as soon as possible. He didn't wait for the beep before picking up the receiver and saying into it, his voice breathless and ragged with sleep, "Will?"

"Dr. Lecter, it's Jack Crawford," came the tense voice on the other side of the line. Hannibal's stomach dropped, and he was about to hang up when Jack said, "But it's about Will."

Without regard for politeness or professionalism, Hannibal demanded, “What happened?”

“He’s found the killer. Cornered him in his own home.” Shock rushed through Hannibal, followed by a visceral fear that only intensified as Jack said, “He’s in trouble, and he’s too far for me to get there. Can you go get him? Stay with him and the killer until the local police arrive.”

Although the thought of dealing with the local police concerned him—out of the practical consideration that they were the agency that would have been most likely to find any evidence that escaped his own careful practice—Hannibal didn’t hesitate to say, “Yes, of course.” He couldn’t deny that his voice betrayed his uncharacteristic anxiety, and he wished his phone was cordless, so he could begin cleaning up and getting dressed right then. But instead he picked up the pen and paper he kept on the table beside the phone and said, “Where is he?” A rustling dominated the line before Jack read off the address and Hannibal scrawled it down.

“I’ll explain everything to the police when I get there,” Jack said. “Keep him safe. Don’t ask questions. Detain the suspect. Call me if something happens.”

The line clicked dead before Hannibal could say he didn’t own a cell phone. Letting the receiver fall into its cradle with a clatter, Hannibal darted back to his bedroom to get ready.

If he remembered correctly, the address Jack had given him was of a small suburban home in a neighborhood of identical small suburban homes, just on the northern side of town. It was no more than a fifteen minute drive away, but even fifteen minutes away from Will, when his safety was in question, was entirely too far. As Hannibal jumped into the shower, quickly rinsing himself down but not taking the time to wash his hair, he closed his eyes and tried to reach out for Will’s scintilla, hoping against hope that their bond would traverse miles.

When he finally accepted that it wouldn’t reach, he growled and slammed a fist against the shower’s tile wall, barely feeling the jolt in his bones. What a failure, he could almost hear his uncle say. What a confused mind, trapped behind all the promise.

Hannibal wondered how long Will had been gone. Wondered why he hadn’t woken up. Wondered if Will had used some spell or ritual or power—or whatever it was that witches did—to keep him from waking. Anger spiked in him. Had Will not trusted him enough to ask his help? Why would Will prefer Hannibal to sleep alone while he ran off to risk his life in the most absurd way possible? Why not leave a note?

As soon as he found Will, he thought while toweling off, he would either kiss him or kick him. Maybe both. He supposed it depended on how debauched he looked. That, and on how much help he needed with the killer. And then, once all of it was sorted, he would go out and get a cell phone and give the number only to Will, and maybe Jack if it was absolutely necessary. That way, if Will ever felt the need to act on rash decisions again, he could call Hannibal directly and save time in the rescue.

Hannibal consciously put himself back in an operating room, focusing on an imaginary surgery as he pulled on his trousers, a red sweater, and shoes. It helped calm him slightly, kept his hands steady enough and mind sharp enough to grab the slip of paper with the killer’s address before he jogged out to his Jaguar.

The blithe thought crossed his mind that he couldn’t remember the last time he’d left his home in the morning without eating breakfast first.

He ignored the speed limit as he raced across town, grateful it was still too early for the morning rush hour. It was different driving without Will sitting beside him, being distracting without trying. As he flew through a light just before it turned red, Hannibal felt the hair at the back of his neck standing on end. He nearly missed the right street, but as the Jaguar whipped around a turn, clipping the curb with a sharp impact to the suspension, Hannibal tried to reach out again for Will's scintilla.

To his massive relief, he felt a faint response, although it was too dim to tell the emotion on the other side. It could have been proud victory, or it could have been Will's dying fears. Hannibal wouldn't know until he was closer, could see Will, reach out to him physically if he had to. But it meant Will was still alive, and that was enough to drive Hannibal forward.

The house was in a long row of its twins, but in its driveway was the Volvo Hannibal recognized as Will's. All the windows were dark except for one on the second floor, just over the small porch, where the front door was slightly ajar.

Hannibal carelessly parked his car on the street, not even giving a damn if it got sideswiped with the rush of morning commuters who would be out on the roads sooner rather than later, although he did remember, mostly out of habit, to lock it as he jumped out and slammed the door. Jogging up the driveway and the steps to the porch, he paused at the door to listen for any ruckus. All he heard over his own ragged breathing was a muffled conversation, so he let himself in and tried to calm himself enough to reach out again for Will's scintilla without bombarding him with distress.

What came back to him was a wary, distracted comfort.

Going up the staircase slower than he wanted to but with enough care that it didn't creak under his weight, Hannibal tried to school his breathing. It was a haphazard process, much less controlled than when he was the one in power, the one stalking his prey, the one with the knife and the crisp plans and the organized, expected responses.

The light led him to what ended up as a small bedroom, or it might have been a bedroom once, if it hadn't been refurnished to closely resemble a small chapel.

Rows upon rows of folding chairs constituted makeshift pews, and a red runner rug defined an aisle, which culminated with a twin bed where the altar should have been. With his back to the door, Will stood in the center of the aisle, gun drawn and aiming at a squirming man who laid on the bed, naked and crying. Will's voice was steady—impressively so—as he spoke to the man, and neither of them seemed to notice Hannibal enter.

"Tell me where you learned the sigil."

Sobbing, the man rocked back and forth on the bed. He wrapped his arms around himself and said, between hiccuping breaths, "Bailey showed me."

Hannibal frowned, coming up behind Will, whose scintilla pulsed pure white, and brushing a hand across his back, feeling an instant reassurance at the heat and strength of the body under his soft touch. Will glanced at him once and then ignored him, returning his steely glare to the man on the bed.

"Who's Bailey?"

The man wasn't composed, of course, but neither was he as hysterical as he looked when he said, "My ex-girlfriend."

It seemed unlikely to Hannibal that a suspect would willingly confess, and with as much calm as could be expected while a gun was pointed at his head. In fact, it seemed unlikely to him that a suspect would even stay put for an impromptu interrogation by a handsome but completely disheveled man like Will Graham. He supposed, as he took a seat in one of the folding chairs closest but still behind Will, that there was some magic involved. And as much as he wanted to know the mechanics, he figured now wasn't the right time to ask.

"How did you choose your victims?" Will asked, his voice low and even and just demanding enough to send a warm shiver down Hannibal's spine.

The man's sniffling paused, and he frowned down the aisle at Will, his tongue darting out to wet his lips. His eyes glinted with a sort of lust that looked closer to insanity, and his hands quivered as he reached down to wrap around his soft penis. Hannibal immediately hated him and wanted to slit his throat, cover the bed in his blood, and show Will that he was also a beast better left undisturbed. But that, too, was a topic for another day.

"Joyce was left handed like my mama," the man said, staring intently at Will with tears streaking down his cheeks as he began to masturbate, "and Reggie was bald like my daddy." Hannibal could see the furrow in Will's brow deepen and his grip on the gun shift. "And Robin—"

A distant siren distracted all three of them, and Hannibal stood, going to the window, where he pushed aside the curtains to stare out over the otherwise quiet neighborhood. With each moment, the siren became louder and more shrill, getting closer and closer. Hannibal turned to warn Will that the police were nearly there, but he froze at what he saw. Something like jealousy but closer to rage sparked in his gut as Will stepped down the makeshift aisle, closer to the man in the bed, saying, with his voice measured and soft, "Stay still, Marcus. Don't move."

Hannibal forced himself to relax, biting his tongue and clenching his teeth until his jaw ached. Out of the corner of his eye, the flashing lights out the window set an instinctual cold into his gut, but he tamped that down too, just long enough to turn and say to Will, his voice tight, "Shall I invite them up?"

"Please," Will said, although he didn't take his eyes off Marcus, who was still focused on bringing himself to completion. At first his newfound jealousy threatened to spike again, but then Hannibal saw the pendant around Will's neck, the slight glow of his ring, and his suspicion of magic was all but confirmed. He wasn't sure whether it soothed the green-eyed monster inside of him or fed it; he had rather enjoyed himself under that same command, although admittedly under different circumstances.

As he ducked out of the room and down the stairs again, Hannibal wondered what the local police would say about a witch detaining a suspect with apparently nothing but magic. Then he wondered how Jack would manage to explain it away. Or maybe that was magic, too.

It wasn't difficult to flag down the police cars as they arrived. Marcus's was the only house with a light on and two cars immediately in front of it. As the first cruiser rolled up and stopped, just a painful breath away from the rear bumper of the Jag, an officer jumped out of the car with his arms already outstretched, gun pointed at the ground near Hannibal's feet. Hannibal immediately raised his hands and said, as calmly as he could, "I'm Dr. Hannibal Lecter. I work with Special Agent Will Graham."

The officer lowered his weapon just long enough to ask, “Where’s the scene?”

“Upstairs,” Hannibal said. “The first door on the left. Will has his weapon drawn, and the suspect is compliant.”

Barging past him with all the courtesy of a tornado, the officer disappeared into the house just as another three jumped out of the arriving cars and followed after him. Hannibal frowned, wishing it was an appropriate enough time to chide them for their manners. Unfortunately, there was a killer to arrest. But very fortunately, this time it wasn’t Hannibal.

***

As the sun finally made its way above the horizon, a cluster of cops emerged from the front door of the house, surrounding a man who looked taller than he had while curled on a bed. He was dressed now, in a haphazard pairing of sweatpants and a dress shirt, and the sniffling had stopped. Until, of course, he nearly tripped down the steps, and half a dozen hands reached out to grab him. Then the tears started up again, and Hannibal allowed himself the cruel pleasure of a short laugh.

Will came out after, without a single policeman to escort him or make sure he didn’t trip, and his scintilla was so small it was nearly invisible, disappearing under a wrinkled gray t-shirt that Hannibal thought he might have seen balled up in Will’s bag the night before. Hannibal stood from where he was leaning against his car, immediately heading in Will’s direction.

As he came closer, he could just barely sense a low, buzzing anger, but mostly he could see the dark glint in Will’s eyes—the closest to real rage Hannibal had ever seen in Will—and Will turned his glare precisely in his direction for several moments before seeming to realize who it was coming for him. Hannibal frowned, noting that Will’s necklace was gone, and upon further inspection, so were his earring and ring.

“Fucking assholes took my shit. Again!” Will grumbled, brushing past Hannibal, who had been ready to offer a comforting hug. The dismissal irritated him, but as he turned to watch Will stalk off, Hannibal consciously focused on shifting the irritation away from Will and toward the great melange of law enforcement. It made sudden sense how easy and tantalizing it would be, if one had the magical knowledge, to inflict minor illness on people like that.

Will went straight to his Volvo and jumped into the driver’s seat, slamming the door behind him. The locks gave a soft click as they engaged. Coming up to the passenger side door, Hannibal knocked on the window and offered Will a half-smile. After a long moment, in which Hannibal tried to send Will a careful sympathy, the locks clicked again, and Hannibal let himself in, sitting next to Will and staring out the windshield. Will made no move to start the car or drive away, which was probably smart, lest he be considered a flight risk, although Hannibal figured he wouldn’t even consider leaving until he had his jewelry back. But Will did lock the doors again, just in case.

“What symptoms should we be on the lookout for this time?”

That elicited a stifled laugh, and Hannibal glanced sidelong at Will, trying not to grin.

“I’ve heard gonorrhea is less than pleasant,” Will said, holding the steering wheel with his elbows locked straight, pushing himself back into his seat. “And very contagious. Who knows? Might start a rumor or two in the department.”

Hannibal raised a brow and reached over to rest a hand on Will's knee, saying, "How sadistic." There was a warm pride in his voice, and after glancing around through the windows and mirrors to make sure no one was paying them any mind—no one was; all the cops either surrounded the sobbing man or stood around, debriefing each other—Hannibal leaned over the center console to press a kiss to the stubble at Will's jaw.

Sighing, Will turned to face Hannibal, and all the humor was gone from his eyes. "Look," he said, letting his hand settle over Hannibal's for a moment before pushing it off his leg. "The more people who know about me, the more trouble it makes." In the following pause, Hannibal thought he could almost feel a tinge of regret from Will, but just as his scintilla had all but disappeared, so had their empathetic bond.

"Will," Hannibal began, but Will cut him off before he could go on.

"No, listen." And this time, although he no longer felt compelled to do so by some form of magic, Hannibal did as he was told. "That," Will gestured toward the house, "is what happens when too many people find out about us."

Hannibal frowned. "So his ex-girlfriend was a witch?"

"I don't think so." Will shook his head, his tongue flicking out over his bitten lip. Hannibal couldn't help but recall the night before, when he'd gotten to taste those lips, that blood, the heaving breaths and the sultry moans. Will glanced up at him, brow knitting, and Hannibal swallowed back his arousal. Now wasn't the time, he supposed. Will gave him a suspicious look before saying, "Marcus's knowledge is probably a few translations removed. His ex might have known a witch, or maybe his ex knew someone who knew a witch. We're not that common."

Nodding, Hannibal said, glad his voice hadn't tightened too much, "He botched the ritual? Lost in translation?"

Will shrugged, rubbing at the spot on his leg where Hannibal's hand had been. "Didn't seem botched to me. He said he was planning to propose to his new girlfriend this weekend." As if he could sense Hannibal's next question, even without being able to clearly read his emotions, Will said, "Apparently he's had bad luck in the past. Figured it'd be easier to murder three people than find someone who'd happily marry him."

There was something strangely noble about that, Hannibal thought. Perhaps it was the sheer determination not to die alone. Of course, it didn't escape him that Marcus had almost definitely sealed his fate to die alone and in prison by getting caught. But Hannibal had to give it to him; it would be difficult to plan around the possibility of someone like Will being put on the case. Even the most careful monsters would struggle to hide from an empath with a magic intuition. Or, at least, one that still had his jewelry.

Sooner or later—and Hannibal imagined it would be sooner—he would have to tell Will about his own dangerous secret. But, thankfully on this count, now wasn't the time.

Just then, a woman approached the driver's side door of the Volvo and knocked on the window, much in the same way Hannibal had earlier. She wasn't in uniform, although she held up a badge as Will rolled down the window just in time for her to say, "Special Agent Graham, thanks for your work. I'm Detective Mallory Keen."

"Hi," Will said, glancing at Hannibal, who gave the woman a polite smile.

“I’m sorry, I’ll just need you two to stay in the open. If you’d like to sit, I’ve got a cruiser free.”

Hannibal bit back his instinct to question the necessity of the request—although it likely wasn’t much of a request, he knew—but Will wasn’t as careful, saying, “Do I get my things back?”

Detective Keen gave him a sheepish smile, the same kind doctors have when greeting the patients that don’t know they have cancer yet. “Unfortunately,” she began, and Will growled, rolling the window up before she could finish. For good measure, Will slammed his fist on the steering wheel of his car, and the horn blared for a good five seconds before he released it. Outside, the detective jumped and glowered, but Hannibal was just grateful it wasn’t his Jaguar instead.

“Perhaps it’s best to do as they say until Jack arrives,” Hannibal said, turning to unlock the passenger side door.

Will whipped around to glare at him, although Hannibal was reasonably sure the dark glint to it wasn’t directed at him. “Jack’s coming?”

“Yes, of course,” Hannibal said. “Who do you think told me where you were?”

The detective knocked on the window again, still looking particularly unpleased and a bit tired still, and Will gave her the universal hand sign for one more minute. “No, I know that,” Will said, shaking his head. “I told him not to come.”

“Why?”

Will sighed and ran a hand through his hair, catching on the tangles that remained from the night before. Hannibal thought he could smell the dried sweat on him still, and he had to keep himself from burying his nose in the crook of Will’s neck to make sure. As he pulled through a loose knot, Will said, “Because I don’t him to find out that you know about me.”

“Will,” Hannibal said, his voice low and stern, “you can trust me. I’m very good at holding my tongue when necessary.”

“You talk all the time. Constantly. About everything. Sometimes I don’t even think you realize how much you talk.”

Hannibal couldn’t deny that, not really, so he just smiled as he opened the passenger side door. “Maybe,” he conceded, “but, at the very least, I can keep a secret.” He closed the door behind him, as gently as he could, and gave a polite, if somewhat forced, nod to the detective, who gestured in frustration at Will still in the car. Hannibal’s eyes twinkled as he said, “A little motivation goes a long way, Detective Keen.”

She sucked in a deep breath and let it out slowly before saying, “Can’t *you* motivate him? I don’t get paid for this.”

Now would probably be a good time to start ingratiating himself with the Baltimore Police Department, he figured. He couldn’t quite keep himself from smiling at the thought, although he should have been more uncomfortable with it than he was. As he rounded the car, he opened the driver side door. Will reluctantly climbed out, crossing his arms over his chest and staring at the ground, probably wishing he could burn a hole through the detective’s shoe.

Briefly, Hannibal wondered if he could.

“The cruiser’s over there,” Keen said, pointing at the police car crossing the bottom of the house’s driveway, the same one that had come within inches of kissing the rear bumper of Hannibal’s Jaguar. The cruiser’s back door was open, but it was otherwise unattended, and Keen said, “I’ll be with you soon, okay?”

And then she turned on her heel with a military precision, striding off in the direction of the mob of uniforms that concealed Marcus Peterson.

Hannibal led Will to the cruiser and stood beside him as Will sat, rubbing at his finger where his ring should have been. Sighing, Hannibal said, “You’ll get them back.”

“Not before they start scratching,” Will said, his humor sharp and dark, and that was the last thing he said for a while. For once, Hannibal didn’t attempt to press him.

***

Jack arrived a little past breakfast time, holding a half-empty styrofoam coffee cup and wiping pastry crumbs from his soul patch. The bags under his eyes were dark and puffy, and he stopped at the curb of the house’s driveway to rub at his forehead.

Still standing beside the rear door of the patrol car that Will sat in, Hannibal cleared his throat and said, “Agent Crawford, glad you could join us.”

“Dr. Lecter,” Jack said as he came up beside them, eyeing Hannibal up and down. Then he glanced down to Will, who was bent over himself, with his head between his knees. Jack frowned as he zeroed in on Hannibal’s hand resting at the back of Will’s neck, gently massaging under his curls, but he only said, “I might have to take you up on your offer of dinner sooner rather than later.”

Hannibal offered a polite smile but nothing more as Detective Keen came up, wearing a thin grimace, and said, “Excuse me, gentlemen. I need to take Agent Graham for a quick deposition.”

The dark expression on Will’s face made her jaw tense up as she took two steps back. Only then did he stand, shoving his hands in his pockets. In the hour they’d been trapped in the open, he’d told Hannibal he felt naked without his ring. Powerless, although he wasn’t. The ring was a focus, he had explained quietly, making sure to switch topics whenever someone got too close. But his constant refrain was that he wanted it back, and he would say that pointedly when anyone he thought would listen passed by the cruiser.

If Hannibal could have, without the doom of certain capture, he would have gone and slaughtered every single person who got between Will and his ring, or anything else Will might have wanted. But as it was, they would just have to wait for now.

So there was a mild, if cruel pleasure, Hannibal thought, that several cops had already excused themselves to the bathroom, looking supremely uncomfortable.

Sparing Hannibal a softer glance, Will sulked after the detective, following her down the street to another car, where half a dozen police stood around doing exactly nothing. The killer had been handcuffed and locked in the back of another car halfway down the street in the opposite direction. At least the half dozen cops standing around that car were guarding something, even if mostly they were chatting with each other.

“So, what’s going on?” Jack asked casually, as if he’d just walked in on a particularly boring soccer match.

Hannibal’s laugh was short and huffing, and he recounted what Will had told him, being careful not to say too much. “Marcus Peterson, 38. Proposed to and rejected by four different women.” What he said next was a purposeful obfuscation. “I suppose he decided he didn’t much care for marriage.”

Chuckling, Jack leaned against the police car and observed the house in front of them, which looked as normal as any other suburban clone. “Nice house for a single guy.”

“He has a girlfriend who doesn’t know about his…” Hannibal paused to consider what word he would use for himself before settling on, “hobby.” When Jack gave him a sideways look, Hannibal said, “Apparently he intended to propose. As soon as this weekend.”

“Well, I hate to break up a perfectly good relationship.” Jack’s voice was deadpan, but he offered a wry wink. Hannibal smiled, and Jack raised a brow in his direction before asking, “Is it a bad time to ask for an update on Will’s progress?”

“Probably,” Hannibal said simply, hoping Jack wouldn’t demand a full report by the morning.

“Can you give me anything?”

Hannibal gave Jack only a stern look. “Unfortunately, Agent Crawford, I’m beginning to think the process will be longer than I had initially thought.” Never mind that was a slight mistruth. It wasn’t quite a lie, because there was still plenty of Will’s anger to iron out, but now Hannibal certainly wasn’t in a hurry. He rather thought he’d enjoy an extended excuse to see Will on a regular basis, even if it was in his office. After all, he had already begun to imagine all the myriad places in which he could trap Will, tease him until he cried, and then find heady, carnal mercy.

It was a good thing, Hannibal suddenly thought, that Jack couldn’t read his emotions like Will could.

“Well,” Jack said, obviously disappointed with the answer, “thanks for keeping him whole through this case, at least. And best of luck with the rest of it.”

Frowning, Hannibal said, more pointed than he intended, “It would help, I believe, if the Bureau treated him better.” Will would probably think he was treading too close to the truth, but Hannibal chose his words carefully. And anyway, what was the worst thing that could happen if Jack found out? Sending Will to another therapist wouldn’t erase what Hannibal knew. And worst case, he figured, he could make himself useful, become Will’s handler properly, if he wasn’t already. So he treaded close and said, “Give him a bit more freedom. I’m under the impression he feels rather trapped.”

Jack sighed loudly before finishing off his coffee. When he focused on Hannibal again, he looked exhausted. “Unfortunately, we can’t, Dr. Lecter.” When Hannibal didn’t respond—again using that very successful technique of waiting for his patient to fill the awkward silence—Jack shook his head and said, “If only you knew.”

The irony, although it would usually amuse Hannibal, now only frustrated him.

“I know all I need to know, Agent Crawford.” And before he could say anything more, tread on the hornet’s nest and reveal himself too much and make a mess of a new pleasure, he turned on his heel to make his exit. But he stopped only a step out and glanced over his shoulder to Jack, saying, “And get his jewelry back, *now*. That would help more than anything at the moment.”

Jack opened his mouth to respond, but Hannibal didn’t bother to listen, instead striding off to where Will was arguing with a collection of cops, all of whom were now shifting uncomfortably, palming their crotches when they thought no one was looking.

***

Will paced across the rug in Hannibal’s office again, his nose buried in *The Crucible* and his ring shimmering in the sunlight. He paused halfway through a stride to glance up at Hannibal and say, “They’re not actually witches, though.” His frown deepened, with his nose scrunched up in a way Hannibal couldn’t help but sketch in his notepad. Closing the book and tossing it onto the desk behind him, Will said, “All that drama! For nothing!”

“Well,” Hannibal said as a gentle smile pulled at his lips, “not nothing.”

The look he got in response was one part exasperated and two parts warm with desire, or Hannibal might even dare say charmed. He paused in his sketching after adding the small crescent moon earring to hide in the figure’s lazy ink curls.

There was a collection of the drawings now, all of Will in various stages of their sessions—in some, he sat with his head in his hands; in others, he was seen from below as he paced the mezzanine bookshelves in Hannibal’s office; in a few, he lounged on Hannibal’s desk, wearing the cocky grin he always got when Hannibal asked him to get down, lest he scuff the wood; in one, he laid on the floor, shirtless, missing his pendant, and with his limbs spread out, tears streaking down his pinched face and a series of sigils drawn across his bare chest in his own blood. Hannibal had attempted to replicate Will’s scintilla on paper, but the ink smudged in a strange direction that simply left the background around his body a watery black.

Hannibal hadn’t added himself to that particular sketch, but if he had, he would have been standing over Will, lazily holding a small knife that dripped Will’s blood right between his eyes, rolling down his face and mixing with the tears. His own fingertips would have been that same watery black with a smear of blood, before, of course, he’d pushed them into Will’s mouth to lick them clean.

He’d added a caption to that one, when usually all he left was a tiny signature.

The student learns from the teacher; the teacher learns from the student.

All things considered, Hannibal was impressed how well Will took the news that they were both monsters. The revelation had ended in something Hannibal hadn’t had a chance to sketch, mostly because his hands were too busy pinning Will’s knees back against his chest. He’d learned how addicting Will’s cries could be, how sweet his tears were, how brilliantly they bloomed across his tongue, how strong their bond was when they tasted each other.

Will liked to teach him small rituals over dinner, and Hannibal returned the favor by teaching the rituals of the kitchen, which Will said may as well have been magic. And Jack, at least as far as they were concerned, was none the wiser.

Maybe it was a mutual blackmail, although a pleasant one.

“So,” Hannibal asked once Will began to walk toward the ladder up to the mezzanine, “I’ll ask again.”

Will paused to look at him over his shoulder, raising an eyebrow in challenge. His scintilla shifted yellow, soft like a sunrise glow. “You think I’ll answer this time?”

“I think you’ll answer eventually,” Hannibal said with a small grin, “and it’s my professional strategy to ask until you do.” With a sigh, Will turned and leaned back against the ladder, crossing his arms over his chest after gesturing for Hannibal to continue. Flipping to an old page in his notepad, Hannibal said, “How did you know about Marcus Peterson? When we went to sleep, you hadn’t even watched the CCTV footage. When I woke up, you were gone. Somehow you knew where to go. How?”

There was a soft twinkle in Will’s eyes, and his lips pulled into a wry smirk. He tipped an invisible hat and said, “What can I say, Dr. Lecter? I’ve got a good intuition.”

A pang of frustration surged through Hannibal’s chest—although, with Will, he couldn’t quite tell the professional kind from the sexual—and he closed his notepad, resigned to the fact it would take at least one more session to get to the bottom of it. In all likelihood, it would take many, and Hannibal wasn’t about to complain.

Standing from his chair and leaving his notepad on the side table, Hannibal stepped up to Will, close enough to smell the sage in his hair. His voice was low and rumbling as he said, “Do you?”

“Yes,” Will said simply, pressing his chest up to meet Hannibal’s. The low thrum of arousal that Hannibal had felt ever since Will stepped foot into his office—at 11:30 on the dot this time—suddenly spiked, and Will said, “For instance, I can tell that you’re about to kiss me.”

Hannibal chuckled, taking a tiny step back and thoroughly enjoying the dance. “And what if I don’t?”

Reaching out to grab the lapels of Hannibal’s jacket and pull him closer again, Will said, “Then I’ll command you to do it.”

He felt the sway of influence in hands, which went to cup Will’s jaw as if by their own accord. Slowly he was getting better at determining his own impulses from the ones Will would push into him, although it was difficult when they often overlapped. Hannibal held Will’s face close, their noses just brushing, and he glanced between Will’s too-blue eyes as he whispered, “I’d advise caution, Will. Last time you complained about the bruises for a week.”

Will’s tiny gasp was cool against his lips, and then Hannibal kissed him firmly, pushing him back against the ladder up to the mezzanine. A soft moan broke their kiss—it was impossible to tell whose—and Will’s arms wrapped around Hannibal’s waist, his fingers clawing at the heavy material of Hannibal’s suit jacket.

As Hannibal’s hands fell to Will’s chest, starting to unbutton his shirt with a familiar ease, the rotary phone in the office’s foyer rang, shrill and cruel and entirely too loud.

Even when Will pulled back, a thread of saliva linked their mouths for a moment before he said, “You need to get that?”

“Let it ring,” Hannibal murmured, unbuttoning Will’s shirt until he could slip his hand under the material and brush a thumb over one of Will’s nipples. He could feel Will’s heartbeat under his skin, and it spurred his growing erection, even as the phone tried to destroy it.

Will grabbed his wrist, stopping him from going any further, and frowned at him. “Are you sure? It might be important. Might be Jack.”

Shaking his head, Hannibal said, “Important people have my cell number.” That was to say, Will and Will alone had the phone number for the shiny new device that sat on Hannibal’s desk, half hidden now under the discarded copy of *The Crucible*. Hannibal made a quick mental note to reshelve the book before taking Will home.

Grinning, halfway adorable and halfway wicked, Will bit his lip and reached up to run his fingers through Hannibal’s hair, destroying its careful style. “Oh, Dr. Lecter,” he said, his voice soft with a moaning lilt. Will kissed him, just a few breathless joinings of lips, and when he broke away, his voice was more decisive, saying, “Down on your knees.”

It was impossible for Hannibal to disobey him then, although he had no interest in doing so anyway. He fell to his knees with a weightless grace, and busied himself with the fly of Will’s trousers as hands tangled through his hair and tugged his head back to stare up at Will, whose sultry look was almost enough to instantly push Hannibal over the edge. His scintilla shimmered around him like a halo, and one of his hands came to rest on Hannibal’s cheek, a thumb brushing across his lower lip. The only thing that could have made the image more erotic for Hannibal was the wide-brimmed hat Will liked to wear around the house when he wore nothing else.

As Hannibal pulled Will’s jeans down, his cock emerged with an eager bob, and a series of bite marks revealed themselves, dark and mottled against the pale skin of Will’s hips and inner thighs. Only a few of the bites broke skin, and where they did, Hannibal hoped for scars.

Finally the rotary phone stopped its incessant ringing, and they were properly alone again. Hannibal nuzzled into the crease of Will’s hip, breathing deeply through his nose and delighting in the herbal musk he’d come to associate with his lover. Will’s cock pressed against his cheek, hot and velvety, and a low moan rumbled through Will’s body, resonating in Hannibal’s sinuses. He pulled back long enough to look up at the sheer intensity in Will’s face before swallowing him down in one go.

Later, as Hannibal thumbed a stray bead of Will’s come from the corner of his mouth, the phone rang again, somehow even more abrasive than before. Will tugged up his jeans, his blush traveling down to his fingertips, and said, “Just answer it, Hannibal.”

Hannibal shot him a look but went to the foyer, palming himself through the materials of his trousers. As much as he wanted to fuck Will now, he wanted even more to fuck him over the dining room table, painting blood and lamb sauce down his chest. So he would contain himself for now, clearing his throat as he picked the phone’s handset up out of its cradle and said into the receiver, “Office of Dr. Hannibal Lecter, psychiatrist.”

“Oh, Dr. Lecter, thank god you answered,” came Franklyn’s desperate voice. “I just wanted to tell you that I had a revelation after this morning’s session!”

Gritting his teeth, Hannibal tried to sound as polite as possible as he said, “Of course, Franklyn. As always, I encourage you to write such revelations in your journal and bring it with you next week.”

Franklyn never seemed to get the message. “Right, but Dr. Lecter, this one is *very* important.”

When Hannibal glanced back toward his office, he saw Will leaning against the doorframe, arms crossed over his chest and curls bobbing with a curious cant of his head. Hannibal swallowed heavily, forcing himself to focus on Franklyn’s babbling. When his patient had to breathe, Hannibal took the opportunity to say, “I’m sorry, Franklyn. I have a patient coming in any minute. I look forward to hearing the rest of your revelation at our next session. Have a good day.”

And before Franklyn could as much as protest, Hannibal hung up, turning to Will, who grinned and said, “I should feel lucky you never radiate as much annoyance with me.”

“I’m afraid this breaks just about every law regarding patient confidentiality,” Hannibal said, coming up to Will and taking his hand to twine their fingers together. It felt entirely too natural, and he couldn’t quite tell where his hand stopped and Will’s started.

Will followed him back through the office, sitting on Hannibal’s lap once he settled into his chair. Nuzzling into the side of his neck, Will said, “You couldn’t keep a secret from me if you tried.”

Hannibal didn’t know if that was true, and he wasn’t sure whether the prospect of it was supposed to comfort or terrify him. So instead he just ran a hand up and down Will’s thigh, pressing on a few new bite marks, which made Will suck in a sharp breath each time. Hannibal had been somewhat disappointed that Will hadn’t cried this time. Well, he figured, he had the rest of the night.

“Go make Jack happy,” Hannibal said, “but be back for dinner. I have a fantastic menu planned.”

Will nodded in acknowledgement, gently rubbing Hannibal’s erection through his trousers and pressing soft kisses against his neck. His body seemed to melt into Hannibal’s and it was several minutes before he said, “Whatever you did, thanks.” Hannibal gave a questioning hum, and Will continued to say, “I feel like I can breathe again.”

“Don’t breathe too easily,” Hannibal warned, “or he’ll think my work is done.”

Will snickered, and warm breaths shifted Hannibal’s hair. “Never,” he said, and it sounded like a promise but may as well have been a spell.

End Notes

on twitter<3

Please drop by the Archive and comment to let the creator know if you enjoyed their work!